

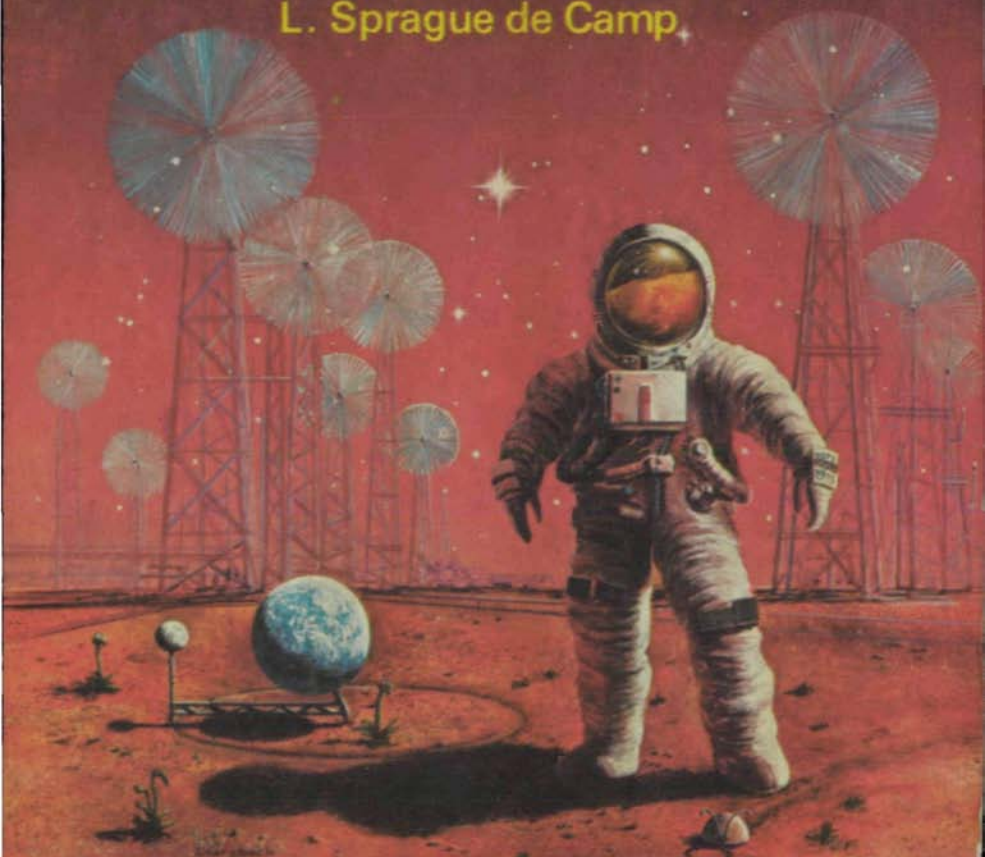
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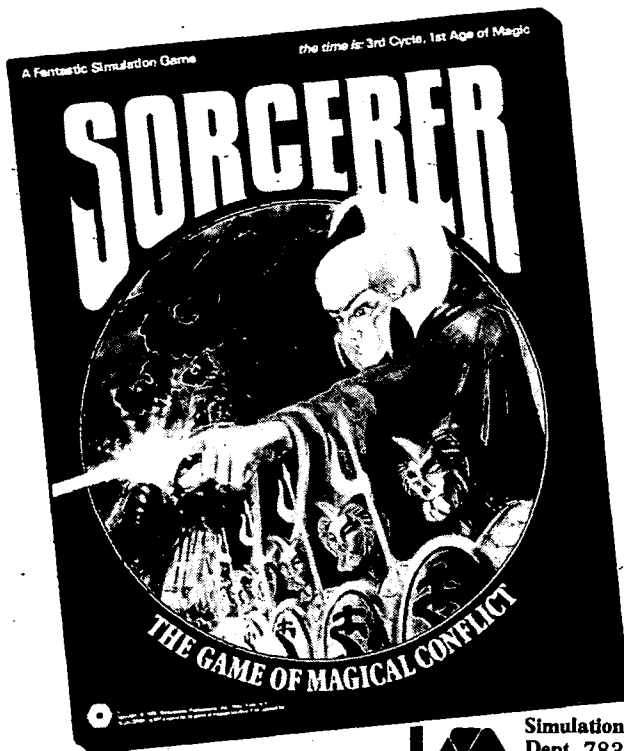


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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 52: No. 2, Whole No. 309, Feb. 1977. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at \$1.00 per copy. Annual subscription \$10.00; \$11.00 in Canada and Mexico, \$12.00 in other foreign countries. Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1976 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.



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John Varley's first story for F&SF was "Picnic On Nearside," August 1974. Since then, he has earned a reputation as one of sf's most exciting new storytellers, through such work as "Retrograde Summer," February 1975; "The Black Hole Passes," June 1975 and, most recently, "The Funhouse Effect," December 1976. This new story is his longest to date and very possibly his best.

In The Hall Of The Martian Kings

by JOHN VARLEY

It took perseverance, alertness, and a willingness to break the rules to watch the sunrise in Tharsis Canyon. Matthew Crawford shivered in the dark, his suit heater turned to emergency setting, his eyes trained toward the east. He knew he had to be watchful. Yesterday he had missed it entirely, snatched away from him in the middle of a long, unavoidable yawn. His jaw muscles stretched, but he controlled it and kept his eyes firmly open.

And there it was. Like the lights in a theater after the show is over: just a quick brightening, a splash of localized bluish-purple over the canyon rim, and he was surrounded by footlights. Day had come, the truncated Martian day that would never touch the blackness over his head.

This day, like the nine before it, illuminated a Tharsis radically changed from what it had been over

the last sleepy ten thousand years. Wind erosion of rocks can create an infinity of shapes, but it never gets around to carving out a straight line or a perfect arc. The human encampment below him broke up the jagged lines of the rocks with regular angles and curves.

The camp was anything but orderly. No one would get the impression that any care had been taken in the haphazard arrangement of dome, lander, crawlers, crawler tracks, and scattered equipment. It had grown, as all human base camps seem to grow, without pattern. He was reminded of the footprints around Tranquility Base, though on a much larger scale.

Tharsis Base sat on a wide ledge about halfway up from the uneven bottom of the Tharsis arm of the Great Rift Valley. The site had been chosen because it was a smooth area, allowing easy access

up a gentle slope to the flat plains of the Tharsis Plateau, while at the same time only a kilometer from the valley floor. No one could agree which area was most worthy of study: plains or canyon. So this site had been chosen as a compromise. What it meant was that the exploring parties had to either climb up or go down, because there wasn't a damn thing worth seeing near the camp. Even the exposed layering and its areological records could not be seen without a half-kilometer crawler ride up to the point where Crawford had climbed to watch the sunrise.

He examined the dome as he walked back to camp. There was a figure hazily visible through the plastic. At this distance he would have been unable to tell who it was if it weren't for the black face. He saw her step up to the dome wall and wipe a clear circle to look through. She spotted his bright red suit and pointed at him. She was suited except for her helmet, which contained her radio. He knew he was in trouble. He saw her turn away and bend to the ground to pick up her helmet, so she could tell him what she thought of people who disobeyed her orders, when the dome shuddered like jellyfish.

An alarm started in his helmet, flat and strangely soothing coming from the tiny speaker. He stood there for a moment as a perfect

smoke ring of dust billowed up around the rim of the dome. Then he was running.

He watched the disaster unfold before his eyes, silent except for the rhythmic beat of the alarm bell in his ears. The dome was dancing and straining, trying to fly. The floor heaved up in the center, throwing the black woman to her knees. In another second the interior was a whirling snowstorm. He skidded on the sand and fell forward, got up in time to see the fiberglass ropes on the side nearest him snap free from the steel spikes anchoring the dome to the rock.

The dome now looked like some fantastic Christmas ornament, filled with snowflakes and the flashing red and blue lights of the emergency alarms. The top of the dome heaved over away from him, and the floor raised itself high in the air, held down by the unbroken anchors on the side farthest from him. There was a gush of snow and dust; then the floor settled slowly back to the ground. There was no motion now but the leisurely folding of the depressurized dome roof as it settled over the structures inside.

The crawler skidded to a stop, nearly rolling over, beside the deflated dome. Two pressure-suited figures got out. They started for the dome, hesitantly, in fits and starts.

One grabbed the other's arm and pointed to the lander. The two of them changed course and scrambled up the rope ladder hanging over the side.

Crawford was the only one to look up when the lock started cycling. The two people almost tumbled over each other coming out of the lock. They wanted to *do* something, and quickly, but didn't know what. In the end, they just stood there silently twisting their hands and looking at the floor. One of them took off her helmet. She was a large woman, in her thirties, with red hair shorn off close to the scalp.

"Matt, we got here as ..." She stopped, realizing how obvious it was. "How's Lou?"

"Lou's not going to make it." He gestured to the bunk where a heavysset man lay breathing raggedly into a clear plastic mask. He was on pure oxygen. There was blood seeping from his ears and nose.

"Brain damage?"

Crawford nodded. He looked around at the other occupants of the room. There was the Surface Mission Commander, Mary Lang, the black woman he had seen inside the dome just before the blowout. She was sitting on the edge of Lou Prager's cot, her head cradled in her hands. In a way, she was a more shocking sight than Lou. No one

who knew her would have thought she could be brought to this limp state of apathy. She had not moved for the last hour.

Sitting on the floor huddled in a blanket was Martin Ralston, the chemist. His shirt was bloody, and there was dried blood all over his face and hands from the nosebleed he'd only recently gotten under control, but his eyes were alert. He shivered, looking from Lang, his titular leader, to Crawford, the only one who seemed calm enough to deal with anything. He was a follower, reliable but unimaginative.

Crawford looked back to the newest arrivals. They were Lucy Stone McKillian, the red-headed ecologist, and Song Sue Lee, the exobiologist. They still stood numbly by the airlock, unable as yet to come to grips with the fact of fifteen dead men and women beneath the dome outside.

"What do they say on the *Burroughs*?" McKillian asked, tossing her helmet on the floor and squatting tiredly against the wall. The lander was not the most comfortable place to hold a meeting; all the couches were mounted horizontally since their purpose was cushioning the acceleration of landing and takeoff. With the ship sitting on its tail, this made ninety percent of the space in the lander useless. They were all gathered on

the circular bulkhead at the rear of the lifesystem, just forward of the fuel tank.

"We're waiting for a reply," Crawford said. "But I can sum up what they're going to say: not good. Unless one of you two has some experience in Mars-lander handling that you've been concealing from us."

Neither of them bothered to answer that. The radio in the nose sputtered, then clanged for their attention. Crawford looked over at Lang, who made no move to go answer it. He stood up and swarmed up the ladder to sit in the copilot's chair. He switched on the receiver.

"Commander Lang?"

"No, this is Crawford again. Commander Lang is ... indisposed. She's busy with Lou, trying to do something."

"That's no use. The doctor says it's a miracle he's still breathing. If he wakes up at all, he won't be anything like you knew him. The telemetry shows nothing like the normal brain wave. Now I've got to talk to Commander Lang. Have her come up." The voice of Mission Commander Weinstein was accustomed to command, and about as emotional as a weather report.

"Sir, I'll ask her, but I don't think she'll come. This is still her operation, you know." He didn't give Weinstein time to reply to that.

Weinstein had been trapped by his own seniority into commanding the *Edgar Rice Burroughs*, the orbital ship that got them to Mars and had been intended to get them back. Command of the *Podkayne*, the disposable lander that would make the lion's share of the headlines, had gone to Lang. There was little friendship between the two, especially when Weinstein fell to brooding about the very real financial benefits Lang stood to reap by being the first woman on Mars, rather than the lowly mission commander. He saw himself as another Michael Collins.

Crawford called down to Lang, who raised her head enough to mumble something.

"What'd she say?"

"She said take a message."

McKillian had been crawling up the ladder as she said this. Now she reached him and said in a lower voice, "Matt, she's pretty broken up. You'd better take over for now."

"Right, I know." He turned back to the radio, and McKillian listened over his shoulder as Weinstein briefed them on the situation as he saw it. It pretty much jibed with Crawford's estimation, except at one crucial point. He signed off and they joined the other survivors.

He looked around at the faces of the others and decided it wasn't the time to speak of rescue pos-

sibilities. He didn't relish being a leader. He was hoping Lang would recover soon and take the burden from him. In the meantime he had to get them started on something. He touched McKillian gently on the shoulder and motioned her to the lock.

"Let's go get them buried," he said. She squeezed her eyes shut tight, forcing out tears, then nodded.

It wasn't a pretty job. Halfway through it, Song came down the ladder with the body of Lou Prager.

"Let's go over what we've learned. First, now that Lou's dead there's very little chance of ever lifting off. That is, unless Mary thinks she can absorb everything she needs to know about piloting the *Podkayne* from those printouts Weinstein sent down. How about it, Mary?"

Mary Lang was laying sideways across the improvised cot that had recently held the *Podkayne* pilot, Lou Prager. Her head was nodding listlessly against the aluminum hull plate behind her, her chin was on her chest. Her eyes were half-open.

Song had given her a sedative from the dead doctor's supplies on the advice of the medic aboard the *E.R.B.* It had enabled her to stop fighting so hard against the screaming panic she wanted to unleash. It hadn't improved her

disposition. She had quit, she wasn't going to do anything for anybody.

When the blowout started, Lang had snapped on her helmet quickly. Then she had struggled against the blizzard and the undulating dome bottom, heading for the roofless framework where the other members of the expedition were sleeping. The blowout was over in ten seconds, and she then had the problem of coping with the collapsing roof, which promptly buried her in folds of clear plastic. It was far too much like one of those nightmares of running knee-deep in quicksand. She had to fight for every meter, but she made it.

She made it in time to see her shipmates of the last six months gasping soundlessly and spouting blood from all over their faces as they fought to get into their pressure suits. It was a hopeless task to choose which two or three to save in the time she had. She might have done better but for the freakish nature of her struggle to reach them; she was in shock and half believed it was only a nightmare. So she grabbed the nearest, who happened to be Doctor Ralston. He had nearly finished donning his suit; so she slapped his helmet on him and moved to the next one. It was Luther Nakamura, and he was not moving. Worse, he was only half suited. Pragmatically she

should have left him and moved on to save the ones who still had a chance. She knew it now, but didn't like it any better than she had liked it then.

While she was stuffing Nakamura into his suit, Crawford arrived. He had walked over the folds of plastic until he reached the dormitory, then sliced through it with his laser normally used to vaporize rock samples.

And he had had time to think about the problem of whom to save. He went straight to Lou Prager and finished suiting him up. But it was already too late. He didn't know if it would have made any difference if Mary Lang had tried to save him first.

Now she lay on the bunk, her feet sprawled carelessly in front of her. She slowly shook her head back and forth.

"You sure?" Crawford prodded her, hoping to get a rise, a show of temper, *anything*.

"I'm sure," she mumbled. "You people know how long they trained Lou to fly this thing? And he almost cracked it up as it was. I ... ah, nuts. It isn't possible."

"I refuse to accept that as a final answer," he said. "But in the meantime we should explore the possibilities if what Mary says is true."

Ralston laughed. It wasn't a bitter laugh; he sounded genuinely

amused. Crawford plowed on.

"Here's what we know for sure. The *E.R.B.* is useless to us. Oh, they'll help us out with plenty of advice, maybe more than we want, but any rescue is out of the question."

"We know that," McKillian said. She was tired and sick from the sight of the faces of her dead friends. "What's the use of all this talk?"

"Wait a moment," Song broke in. "Why can't they ... I mean they have plenty of time, don't they? They have to leave in six months, as I understand it, because of the orbital elements, but in that time"

"Don't you know anything about spaceships?" McKillian shouted. Song went on, unperturbed.

"I do know enough to know the *Edgar* is not equipped for an atmosphere entry. My idea was, not to bring down the whole ship but only what's aboard the ship that we need. Which is a pilot. Might that be possible?"

Crawford ran his hands through his hair, wondering what to say. That possibility had been discussed, and was being studied. But it had to be classed as extremely remote.

"You're right," he said. "What we need is a pilot, and that pilot is Commander Weinstein. Which

presents problems legally, if nothing else. He's the captain of a ship and should not leave it. That's what kept him on the *Edgar* in the first place. But he did have a lot of training on the lander simulator back when he was so sure he'd be picked for the ground team. You know Winey, always the instinct to be the one-man show. So if he thought he could do it, he'd be down here in a minute to bail us out and grab the publicity. I understand they're trying to work out a heat-shield parachute system from one of the drop capsules that were supposed to ferry down supplies to us during the stay here. But it's very risky. You don't modify an aerodynamic design lightly, not one that's supposed to hit the atmosphere at ten thousand-plus kilometers. So I think we can rule that out. They'll keep working on it, but when it's done, Winey won't step into the damn thing. He wants to be a hero, but he wants to live to enjoy it, too."

There had been a brief lifting of spirits among Song, Ralston, and McKillian at the thought of a possible rescue. The more they thought about it, the less happy they looked. They all seemed to agree with Crawford's assessment.

"So we'll put that one in the Fairy Godmother file and forget about it. If it happens, fine. But we'd better plan on the assumption

that it won't. As you may know, the *E.R.B.-Podkayne* are the only ships in existence that can reach Mars and land on it. One other pair is in the congressional funding stage. Winey talked to Earth and thinks there'll be a speedup in the preliminary paperwork and the thing'll start building in a year. The launch was scheduled for five years from now, but it might get as much as a year boost. It's a rescue mission now, easier to sell. But the design will need modification, if only to include five more seats to bring us all back. You can bet on there being more modifications when we send in our report on the blowout. So we'd better add another six months to the schedule."

McKillian had had enough. "Matt, what the hell are you talking about? Rescue mission? Damn it, you know as well as I that if they find us here, we'll be long dead. We'll probably be dead in another year."

"That's where you're wrong. We'll survive."

"How?"

"I don't have the faintest idea."

He looked her straight in the eye as he said this. She almost didn't bother to answer, but curiosity got the best of her.

"Is this just a morale session? Thanks, but I don't need it. I'd rather face the situation as it is. Or do you really have something?"

"Both. I don't have anything concrete except to say that we'll survive the same way humans have always survived: by staying warm, by eating, by drinking. To that list we have to add 'by breathing.' That's a hard one, but other than that we're no different than any other group of survivors in a tough spot. I don't know what we'll have to do, specifically, but I know we'll find the answers."

"Or die trying," Song said.

"Or die trying." He grinned at her. She at least had grasped the essence of the situation. Whether survival was possible or not, it was necessary to maintain the illusion that it was. Otherwise, you might as well cut your throat. You might as well not even be born, because life is an inevitably fatal struggle to survive.

"What about air?" McKillian asked, still unconvinced.

"I don't know," he told her cheerfully. "It's a tough problem, isn't it?"

"What about water?"

"Well, down in that valley there's a layer of permafrost about twenty meters down."

She laughed. "Wonderful. So that's what you want us to do? Dig down there and warm the ice with our pink little hands? It won't work, I tell you."

Crawford waited until she had run through a long list of reasons

why they were doomed. Most of them made a great deal of sense. When she was through, he spoke softly.

"Lucy, listen to yourself."

"I'm just —"

"You're arguing on the side of death. Do you want to die? Are you so determined that you won't listen to someone who says you can live?"

She was quiet for a long time, then shuffled her feet awkwardly. She glanced at him, then at Song and Ralston. They were waiting, and she had to blush and smile slowly at them.

"You're right. What do we do first?"

"Just what we were doing. Taking stock of our situation. We need to make a list of what's available to us. We'll write it down on paper, but I can give you a general rundown." He counted off the points on his fingers.

"One, we have food for twenty people for three months. That comes to about a year for the five of us. With rationing, maybe a year and a half. That's assuming all the supply capsules reach us all right. In addition, the *Edgar* is going to clean the pantry to the bone and give us everything they can possibly spare and send it to us in the three spare capsules. That might come to two years or even three.

"Two, we have enough water to last us forever if the recyclers keep

going. That'll be a problem, because our reactor will run out of power in two years. We'll need another power source, and maybe another water source.

"The oxygen problem is about the same. Two years at the outside. We'll have to find a way to conserve it a lot more than we're doing. Offhand, I don't know how. Song, do you have any ideas?"

She looked thoughtful, which produced two vertical punctuation marks between her slanted eyes.

"Possibly a culture of plants from the *Edgar*. If we could rig some way to grow plants in Martian sunlight and not have them killed by the ultraviolet"

McKillian looked horrified, as any good ecologist would.

"What about contamination?" she asked. "What do you think that sterilization was for before we landed? Do you want to louse up the entire ecological balance of Mars? No one would ever be sure if samples in the future were real Martian plants or mutated Earth stock."

"What ecological balance?" Song shot back. "You know as well as I do that this trip has been nearly a zero. A few anaerobic bacteria, a patch of lichen, both barely distinguishable from Earth forms —"

"That's just what I mean. You import Earth forms now, and we'll never tell the difference."

"But it could be done, right? With the proper shielding so the plants won't be wiped out before they ever sprout, we could have a hydroponics plant functioning —"

"Oh, yes, it could be done. I can see three or four dodges right now. But you're not addressing the main question, which is —"

"Hold it," Crawford said. "I just wanted to know if you had any ideas." He was secretly pleased at the argument; it got them both thinking along the right lines, moved them from the deadly apathy they must guard against.

"I think this discussion has served its purpose, which was to convince everyone here that survival is possible." He glanced uneasily at Lang, still nodding, her eyes glassy as she saw her teammates die before her eyes.

"I just want to point out that instead of an expedition, we are now a colony. Not in the usual sense of planning to stay here forever, but all our planning will have to be geared to that fiction. What we're faced with is not a simple matter of stretching supplies until rescue comes. Stopgap measures are not likely to do us much good. The answers that will save us are the long-term ones, the sort of answers a colony would be looking for. About two years from now we're going to have to be in a position to survive with some sort of lifestyle

that could support us forever. We'll have to fit into this environment where we can and adapt it to us where we can. For that, we're better off than most of the colonists of the past, at least for the short term. We have a large supply of everything a colony needs: food, water, tools, raw materials, energy, brains, and women. Without these things, no colony has much of a chance. All we lack is a regular resupply from the home country, but a really good group of colonists can get along without that. What do you say? Are you all with me?"

Something had caused Mary Lang's eyes to look up. It was a reflex by now, a survival reflex conditioned by a lifetime of fighting her way to the top. It took root in her again and pulled her erect on the bed, then to her feet. She fought off the effects of the drug and stood there, eyes bleary but aware.

"What makes you think that women are a natural resource, Crawford?" she said, slowly and deliberately.

"Why, what I meant was that without the morale uplift provided by members of the opposite sex, a colony will lack the push needed to make it."

"That's what you meant, all right. And you meant women, available to the *real* colonists as a reason to live. I've heard it before. That's a male-oriented way to look

at it, Crawford." She was regaining her stature as they watched, seeming to grow until she dominated the group with the intangible power that marks a leader. She took a deep breath and came fully awake for the first time that day.

"We'll stop that sort of thinking right now. I'm the mission commander. I appreciate you taking over while I was ... how did you say it? Indisposed. But you should pay more attention to the social aspects of our situation. If anyone is a commodity here, it's you and Ralston, by virtue of your scarcity. There will be some thorny questions to resolve there, but for the meantime we will function as a unit, under my command. We'll do all we can to minimize social competition among the women for the men. That's the way it must be. Clear?"

She was answered by quiet assent and nods of her head. She did not acknowledge it but plowed right on.

"I wondered from the start why you were along, Crawford." She was pacing slowly back and forth in the crowded space. The others got out of her way almost without thinking, except for Ralston who still huddled under his blanket. "A historian? Sure, it's a fine idea, but pretty impractical. I have to admit that I've been thinking of you as a luxury, and about as useful as the nipples on a man's chest. But I was

wrong. All the NASA people were wrong. The Astronaut Corps fought like crazy to keep you off this trip. Time enough for that on later flights. We were blinded by our loyalty to the test-pilot philosophy of space flight. We wanted as few scientists as possible and as many astronauts as we could manage. We don't like to think of ourselves as ferry-boat pilots. I think we demonstrated during Apollo that we could handle science jobs as well as anyone. We saw you as a kind of insult, a slap in the face by the scientists in Houston to show us how low our stock has fallen."

"If I might be able to —"

"Shut up. But we were wrong. I read in your resume that you were quite a student of survival. What's your honest assessment of our chances?"

Crawford shrugged, uneasy at the question. He didn't know if it was the right time to even postulate that they might fail.

"Tell me the truth."

"Pretty slim. Mostly the air problem. The people I've read about never sank so low that they had to worry about where their next breath was coming from."

"Have you ever heard of Apollo 13?"

He smiled at her. "Special circumstances. Short-term problems."

"You're right, of course. And in

the only two other real space emergencies since that time, all hands were lost." She turned and scowled at each of them in turn.

"But we're *not* going to lose." She dared any of them to disagree, and no one was about to. She relaxed and resumed her stroll around the room. She turned to Crawford again.

"I can see I'll be drawing on your knowledge a lot in the years to come. What do you see as the next order of business?"

Crawford relaxed. The awful burden of responsibility, which he had never wanted, was gone. He was content to follow her lead.

"To tell you the truth, I was wondering what to say next. We have to make a thorough inventory. I guess we should start on that."

"That's fine, but there is an even more important order of business. We have to go out to the dome and find out what the hell caused the blowout. The damn thing should *not* have blown; it's the first of its type to do so. And from the *bottom*. But it did blow, and we should know why, or we're ignoring a fact about Mars that might still kill us. Let's do that first. Ralston, can you walk?"

When he nodded, she sealed her helmet and started into the lock. She turned and looked speculatively at Crawford.

"I swear, man, if you had

touched me with a cattle prod you couldn't have got a bigger rise out of me than you did with what you said a few minutes ago. Do I dare ask?"

Crawford was not about to answer. He said, with a perfectly straight face, "Me? Maybe you should just assume I'm a chauvinist."

"We'll see, won't we?"

"What is that stuff?"

Song Sue Lee was on her knees, examining one of the hundreds of short, stiff spikes extruding from the ground. She tried to scratch her head but was frustrated by her helmet.

"It looks like plastic. But I have a strong feeling it's the higher life-form Lucy and I were looking for yesterday."

"And you're telling me those little spikes are what poked holes in the dome bottom? I'm not buying that."

Song straightened up, moving stiffly. They had all worked hard to empty out the collapsed dome and peel back the whole, bulky mess to reveal the ground it had covered. She was tired and stepped out of character for a moment to snap at Mary Lang.

"I didn't tell you that. We pulled the dome back and found spikes. It was your inference that they poked holes in the bottom."

"I'm sorry," Lang said, quietly. "Go on with what you were saying."

"Well," Song admitted, "it wasn't a bad inference, at that. But the holes I saw were not punched through. They were eaten away." She waited for Lang to protest that the dome bottom was about as chemically inert as any plastic yet devised. But Lang had learned her lesson. And she had a talent for facing facts.

"So. We have a thing here that eats plastic. And seems to be made of plastic, into the bargain. Any ideas why it picked this particular spot to grow, and no other?"

"I have an idea on that," McKillian said. "I've had it in mind to do some studies around the dome to see if the altered moisture content we've been creating here had any effect on the spores in the soil. See, we've been here nine days, spouting out water vapor, carbon dioxide, and quite a bit of oxygen into the atmosphere. Not much, but maybe more than it seems, considering the low concentrations that are naturally available. We've altered the biome. Does anyone know where the exhaust air from the dome was expelled?"

Lang raised her eyebrows. "Yes, it was under the dome. The air we exhausted was warm, you see, and it was thought it could be put to use one last time before we let it go, to warm the floor of the dome and

decrease heat loss."

"And the water vapor collected on the underside of the dome when it hit the cold air. Right. Do you get the picture?"

"I think so," Lang said. "It was so little water, though. You know we didn't want to waste it; we condensed it out until the air we exhausted was dry as a bone."

"For Earth, maybe. Here it was a torrential rainfall. It reached seeds or spores in the ground and triggered them to start growing. We're going to have to watch it when we use anything containing plastic. What does that include?"

Lang groaned. "All the air-lock seals, for one thing." There were grimaces from all of them at the thought of that. "For another, a good part of our suits. Song, watch it, don't step on that thing. We don't know how powerful it is or if it'll eat the plastic in your boots, but we'd better play it safe. How about it, Ralston? Think you can find out how bad it is?"

"You mean identify the solvent these things use? Probably, if we can get some sort of work space and I can get to my equipment."

"Mary," McKillian said, "it occurs to me that I'd better start looking for airborne spores. If there are some, it could mean that the airlock on the *Podkayne* is vulnerable. Even thirty meters off the ground."

"Right. Get on that. Since we're sleeping in it until we can find out what we can do on the ground, we'd best be sure it's safe. Meantime, we'll all sleep in our suits." There were helpless groans at this, but no protests. McKillian and Ralston headed for the pile of salvaged equipment, hoping to rescue enough to get started on their analyses. Song knelt again and started digging around one of the ten-centimeter spikes.

Crawford followed Lang back toward the *Podkayne*.

"Mary, I wanted ... is it all right if I call you Mary?"

"I guess so. I don't think 'Commander Lang' would wear well over five years. But you'd better still *think* commander."

He considered it. "All right, Commander Mary." She punched him playfully. She had barely known him before the disaster. He had been a name on a roster and a sore spot in the estimation of the Astronaut Corps. But she had borne him no personal malice, and now found herself beginning to like him.

"What's on your mind?"

"Ah, several things. But maybe it isn't my place to bring them up now. First, I want to say that if you're ... ah, concerned, or doubtful of my support or loyalty because I took over command for a while ... earlier today, well"

"Well?"

"I just wanted to tell you that I have no ambitions in that direction," he finished lamely.

She patted him on the back. "Sure, I know. You forget, I read your dossier. It mentioned several interesting episodes that I'd like you to tell me about someday, from your 'soldier-of-fortune' days —"

"Hell, those were grossly overblown. I just happened to get into some scrapes and managed to get out of them."

"Still, it got you picked for this mission out of hundreds of applicants. The thinking was that you'd be a wild card, a man of action with proven survivability. Maybe it worked out. But the other thing I remember on your card was that you're not a leader. No, that you're a loner who'll cooperate with a group and be no discipline problem, but you work better alone. Want to strike out on your own?"

He smiled at her. "No, thanks. But what you said is right. I have no hankering to take charge of anything. But I do have some knowledge that might prove useful."

"And we'll use it. You just speak up, I'll be listening." She started to say something, then thought of something else. "Say, what are your ideas on a woman bossing this project? I've had to fight that all the way from my Air Force days. So if you have any

objections you might as well tell me up front."

He was genuinely surprised. "You didn't take that crack seriously, did you? I might as well admit it. It was intentional, like that cattle prod you mentioned. You looked like you needed a kick in the ass."

"And thank you. But you didn't answer my question."

"Those who lead, lead," he said, simply. "I'll follow you as long as you keep leading."

"As long as it's in the direction you want?" She laughed, and poked him in the ribs. "I see you as my Grand Vizier, the man who holds the arcane knowledge and advises the regent. I think I'll have to watch out for you. I know a little history, myself."

Crawford couldn't tell how serious she was. He shrugged it off.

"What I really wanted to talk to you about is this: You said you couldn't fly this ship. But you were not yourself, you were depressed and feeling hopeless. Does that still stand?"

"It stands. Come on up and I'll show you why."

In the pilot's cabin, Crawford was ready to believe her. Like all flying machines since the days of the windsock and open cockpit, this one was a mad confusion of dials, switches, and lights designed to awe anyone who knew nothing about it.

He sat in the copilot's chair and listened to her.

"We had a back-up pilot, of course. You may be surprised to learn that it wasn't me. It was Dorothy Cantrell, and she's dead. Now I know what everything does on this board, and I can cope with most of it easily. What I don't know, I could learn. Some of the systems are computer-driven; give it the right program and it'll fly itself, in space." She looked longingly at the controls, and Crawford realized that, like Weinstein, she didn't relish giving up the fun of flying to boss a gang of explorers. She was a former test pilot, and above all things she loved flying. She patted an array of hand controls on her right side. There were more like them on the left.

"This is what would kill us, Crawford. What's your first name? Matt. Matt, this baby is a flyer for the first forty thousand meters. It doesn't have the juice to orbit on the jets alone. The wings are folded up now. You probably didn't see them on the way in, but you saw the models. They're very light, super-critical, and designed for this atmosphere. Lou said it was like flying a bathtub, but it flew. And it's a *skill*, almost an art. Lou practiced for three years on the best simulators we could build and still had to rely on things you can't learn in a simulator. And he barely got us

down in one piece. We didn't noise it around, but it was a *damn* close thing. Lou was young; so was Cantrell. They were both fresh from flying. They flew every day, they had the *feel* for it. They were tops." She slumped back into her chair. "I haven't flown anything but trainers for eight years."

Crawford didn't know if he should let it drop.

"But you were one of the best, everyone knows that. You still don't think you could do it?"

She threw up her hands. "How can I make you understand? This is nothing like anything I've ever flown. You might as well" She groped for a comparison, trying to coax it out with gestures in the air. "Listen. Does the fact that someone can fly a biplane, maybe even be the best goddamn biplane pilot that ever was, does that mean they're qualified to fly a helicopter?"

"I don't know."

"It doesn't. Believe me."

"All right. But the fact remains that you're the closest thing on Mars to a pilot for the *Podkayne*. I think you should consider that when you're deciding what we should do." He shut up, afraid to sound like he was pushing her.

She narrowed her eyes and gazed at nothing.

"I have thought about it." She waited for a long time. "I think the chances are about a thousand to

one against us if I try to fly it. But I'll do it, if we come to that. And that's *your* job. Showing me some better odds. If you can't, let me know."

Three weeks later, the Tharsis Canyon had been transformed into a child's garden of toys. Crawford had thought of no better way to describe it. Each of the plastic spikes had blossomed into a fanciful windmill, no two of them just alike. There were tiny ones, with the vanes parallel to the ground and no more than ten centimeters tall. There were derricks of spidery plastic struts that would not have looked too out of place on a Kansas farm. Some of them were five meters high. They came in all colors and many configurations, but all had vanes covered with a transparent film like cellophane, and all were spinning into colorful blurs in the stiff Martian breeze. Crawford thought of an industrial park built by gnomes. He could almost see them trudging through the spinning wheels.

Song had taken one apart as well as she could. She was still shaking her head in disbelief. She had not been able to excavate the long insulated taproot, but she could infer how deep it went. It extended all the way down to the layer of permafrost, twenty meters down.

The ground between the windmills was coated in shimmering plastic. This was the second part of the plants' ingenious solution to survival on Mars. The windmills utilized the energy in the wind, and the plastic coating on the ground was in reality two thin sheets of plastic with a space between for water to circulate. The water was heated by the sun then pumped down to the permafrost, melting a little more of it each time.

"There's still something missing from our picture," Song had told them the night before when she delivered her summary of what she had learned. "Marty hasn't been able to find a mechanism that would permit these things to grow by ingesting sand and rock and turning it into plasticlike materials. So we assume there is a reservoir of something like crude oil down there, maybe frozen in with the water."

"Where would that have come from?" Lang had asked.

"You've heard of the long-period Martian seasonal theories? Well, part of it is more than a theory. The combination of the Martian polar inclination, the precessional cycle, and the eccentricity of the orbit produces seasons that are about twelve thousand years long. We're in the middle of winter, though we landed in the nominal 'summer.' It's been theorized that

if there were any Martian life it would have adapted to these longer cycles. It hibernates in spores during the cold cycle, when the water and carbon dioxide freeze out at the poles, then comes out when enough ice melts to permit biological processes. We seem to have fooled these plants; they thought summer was here when the water vapor content went up around the camp."

"So what about the crude?" Ralston asked. He didn't completely believe that part of the model they had evolved. He was a laboratory chemist, specializing in inorganic compounds. The way these plants produced plastics without high heat, through purely catalytic interactions, had him confused and defensive. He wished the crazy windmills would go away.

"I think I can answer that," McKillian said. "These organisms barely scrape by in the best of times. The ones that have made it waste nothing. It stands to reason that any really ancient deposits of crude oil would have been exhausted in only a few of these cycles. So it must be that what we're thinking of as crude oil must be something a little different. It has to be the remains of the last generation."

"But how did the remains get so far below ground?" Ralston asked. "You'd expect them to be high up.

The winds couldn't bury them that deep in only twelve thousand years."

"You're right," said McKillian. "I don't really know. But I have a theory. Since these plants waste nothing, why not conserve their bodies when they die? They sprouted from the ground; isn't it possible they could withdraw when things start to get tough again? They'd leave spores behind them as they retreated, distributing them all through the soil. That way, if the upper ones blew away or, were sterilized by the ultraviolet, the ones just below them would still thrive when the right conditions returned. When they reached the permafrost, they'd decompose into this organic slush we've postulated, and ... well, it does get a little involved, doesn't it?"

"Sounds all right to me," Lang assured her. "It'll do for a working theory. Now what about airborne spores?"

It turned out that they were safe from that imagined danger. There were spores in the air now, but they were not dangerous to the colonists. The plants attacked only certain kinds of plastics, and then only in certain stages of their lives. Since they were still changing, it bore watching, but the airlocks and suits were secure. The crew was enjoying the luxury of sleeping without their suits.

And there was much work to do. Most of the physical sort devolved on Crawford and, to some extent, on Lang. It threw them together a lot. The other three had to be free to pursue their researches, as it had been decided that only in knowing their environment would they stand a chance.

The two of them had managed to salvage most of the dome. Working with patching kits and lasers to cut the tough material, they had constructed a much smaller dome. They erected it on an outcropping of bare rock, rearranged the exhaust to prevent more condensation on the underside, and added more safety features. They now slept in a pressurized building inside the dome, and one of them stayed awake on watch at all times. In drills, they had come from a deep sleep to full pressure-integrity in thirty seconds. They were not going to get caught again.

Crawford looked away from the madly whirling rotors of the wind-mill farm. He was with the rest of the crew, sitting in the dome with his helmet off. That was as far as Lang would permit anyone to go except in the cramped sleeping quarters. Song Sue Lee was at the radio giving her report to the *Edgar Rice Burroughs*. In her hand was one of the pump modules she had dissected out of one of the plants. It consisted of a half-meter set of

eight blades that turned freely on teflon bearings. Below it were various tiny gears and the pump itself. She twirled it idly as she spoke.

"I don't really get it," Crawford admitted, talking quietly to Lucy McKillian. "What's so revolutionary about little windmills?"

"It's just a whole new area," McKillian whispered back. "Think about it. Back on Earth, nature never got around to inventing the wheel. I've sometimes wondered why not. There are limitations, of course, but it's such a good idea. Just look what we've done with it. But all motion in nature is confined to up and down, back and forth, in and out, or squeeze and relax. Nothing on Earth goes round and round, unless we built it. Think about it."

Crawford did, and began to see the novelty of it. He tried in vain to think of some mechanism in an animal or plant of Earthly origin that turned and kept on turning forever. He could not.

Song finished her report and handed the mike to Lang. Before she could start, Weinstein came on the line.

"We've had a change in plan up here," he said, with no preface. "I hope this doesn't come as a shock. If you think about it, you'll see the logic in it. We're going back to Earth in seven days."

It didn't surprise them too

much. The *Burroughs* had given them just about everything it could in the form of data and supplies. There was one more capsule load due; after that, its presence would only be a frustration to both groups. There was a great deal of irony in having two such powerful ships so close to each other and being so helpless to do anything concrete. It was telling on the crew of the *Burroughs*.

"We've recalculated everything based on the lower mass without the twenty of you and the six tons of samples we were allowing for. By using the fuel we would have ferried down to you for takeoff, we can make a faster orbit down toward Venus. The departure date for that orbit is seven days away. We'll rendezvous with a drone capsule full of supplies we hadn't counted on." And besides, Lang thought to herself, it's much more dramatic. *Plunging sunward on the chancy cometary orbit, their pantries stripped bare, heading for the fateful rendezvous*

"I'd like your comments," he went on. "This isn't absolutely final as yet."

They all looked at Lang. They were reassured to find her calm and unshaken.

"I think it's the best idea. One thing; you've given up on any thoughts of me flying the *Pod-kayne*?"

"No insult intended, Mary," Weinstein said, gently. "But, yes, we have. It's the opinion of the people Earthside that you couldn't do it. They've tried some experiments, coaching some very good pilots and putting them into the simulators. They can't do it, and we don't think you could, either."

"No need to sugar-coat it. I know it as well as anyone. But even a billion to one shot is better than nothing. I take it they think Crawford is right, that survival is at least theoretically possible?"

There was a long hesitation. "I guess that's correct. Mary, I'll be frank. I don't think it's possible. I hope I'm wrong, but I don't expect"

"Thank you, Winey, for the encouraging words. You always did know what it takes to buck a person up. By the way, that other mission, the one where you were going to ride a meteorite down here to save our asses, that's scrubbed, too?"

The assembled crew smiled, and Song gave a high-pitched cheer. Weinstein was not the most popular man on Mars.

"Mary, I told you about that already," he complained. It was a gentle complaint, and, even more significant, he had not objected to the use of his nickname. He was being gentle with the condemned. "We worked on it around the clock. I even managed to get permission

to turn over command temporarily. But the mock-ups they made Earthside didn't survive the re-entry. It was the best we could do. I couldn't risk the entire mission on a configuration the people back on Earth wouldn't certify."

"I know. I'll call you back tomorrow." She switched the set off and sat back on her heels. "I swear, if the Earthside tests on a roll of toilet paper didn't ... he wouldn't" She cut the air with her hands. "What am I saying? That's petty. I don't like him, but he's right." She stood up, puffing out her cheeks as she exhaled a pent-up breath.

"Come on, crew, we've got a lot of work."

They named their colony New Amsterdam, because of the windmills. The name of whirligig was the one that stuck on the Martian plants, though Crawford held out for a long time in favor of spinners.

They worked all day and tried their best to ignore the *Burroughs* overhead. The messages back and forth were short and to the point. Helpless as the mother ship was to render them more aid, they knew they would miss it when it was gone. So the day of departure was a stiff, determinedly nonchalant affair. They all made a big show of going to bed hours before the scheduled breakaway.

When he was sure the others were asleep, Crawford opened his eyes and looked around the darkened barracks. It wasn't much in the way of a home; they were crowded against each other on rough pads made of insulating material. The toilet facilities were behind a flimsy barrier against one wall, and smelled. But none of them would have wanted to sleep outside in the dome, even if Lang had allowed it.

The only light came from the illuminated dials that the guard was supposed to watch all night. There was no one sitting in front of them. Crawford assumed the guard had gone to sleep. He would have been upset, but there was no time. He had to suit up, and he welcomed the chance to sneak out. He began to furtively don his pressure suit.

As a historian, he felt he could not let such a moment slip by unobserved. Silly, but there it was. He had to be out there, watch it with his own eyes. It didn't matter if he never lived to tell about it, he must record it.

Someone sat up beside him. He froze, but it was too late. She rubbed her eyes and peered into the darkness.

"Matt?" she yawned. "What's... what is it? Is something —"

"Shh. I'm going out. Go back to sleep. Song?"

"Um hmmm." She stretched,

dug her knuckles fiercely into her eyes, and smoothed her hair back from her face. She was dressed in a loose-fitting bottoms of a ship-suit, a gray piece of dirty cloth that badly needed washing, as did all their clothes. For a moment, as he watched her shadow stretch and stand up, he wasn't interested in the *Burroughs*. He forced his mind away from her.

"I'm going with you," she whispered.

"All right. Don't wake the others."

Standing just outside the airlock was Mary Lang. She turned as they came out, and did not seem surprised.

"Were you the one on duty?" Crawford asked her.

"Yeah. I broke my own rule. But so did you two. Consider yourselves on report." She laughed and beckoned them over to her. They linked arms and stood staring up at the sky.

"How much longer?" Song asked, after some time had passed.

"Just a few minutes. Hold tight." Crawford looked over to Lang and thought he saw tears, but he couldn't be sure in the dark.

There was a tiny new star, brighter than all the rest, brighter than Phobos. It hurt to look at it but none of them looked away. It was the fusion drive of the *Edgar Rice Burroughs*, heading sunward,

away from the long winter on Mars. It stayed on for long minutes, then sputtered and was lost. Though it was warm in the dome, Crawford was shivering. It was ten minutes before any of them felt like facing the barracks.

They crowded into the airlock, carefully not looking at each other's faces as they waited for the automatic machinery. The inner door opened and Lang pushed forward — and right back into the airlock. Crawford had a glimpse of Ralston and Lucy McKillian; then Mary shut the door.

"Some people have no poetry in their souls," Mary said.

"Or too much," Song giggled.

"You people want to take a walk around the dome with me? Maybe we could discuss ways of giving people a little privacy."

The inner lock door was pulled open, and there was McKillian, squinting into the bare bulb that lighted the lock while she held her shirt in front of her with one hand.

"Come on in," she said, stepping back. "We might as well talk about this." They entered, and McKillian turned on the light and sat down on her mattress. Ralston was blinking, nervously tucked into his pile of blankets. Since the day of the blowout he never seemed to be warm enough.

Having called for a discussion, McKillian proceeded to clam up.

Song and Crawford sat on their bunks, and eventually as the silence stretched tighter, they all found themselves looking to Lang.

She started stripping out of her suit. "Well, I guess that takes care of that. So glad to hear all your comments. Lucy, if you were expecting some sort of reprimand, forget it. We'll take steps first thing in the morning to provide some sort of privacy for that, but, no matter what, we'll all be pretty close in the years to come. I think we should all relax. Any objections?" She was half out of her suit when she paused to scan them for comments. There were none. She stripped to her skin and reached for the light.

"In a way it's about time," she said, tossing her clothes in a corner. "The only thing to do with these clothes is burn them. We'll all smell better for it. Song, you take the watch." She flicked out the lights and reclined heavily on her mattress.

There was much rustling and squirming for the next few minutes as they got out of their clothes. Song brushed against Crawford in the dark and they murmured apologies. Then they all bedded down in their own bunks. It was several tense, miserable hours before anyone got to sleep.

The week following the departure of the *Burroughs* was one

of hysterical overreaction by the New Amsterdamites. The atmosphere was forced and false; an eat-drink-and-be-merry feeling pervaded everything they did.

They built a separate shelter inside the dome, not really talking aloud about what it was for. But it did not lack for use. Productive work suffered as the five of them frantically ran through all the possible permutations of three women and two men. Animosities developed, flourished for a few hours, and dissolved in tearful reconciliations. Three ganged up on two, two on one, one declared war on all the other four. Ralston and Song announced an engagement, which lasted ten hours. Crawford nearly came to blows with Lang, aided by McKillian. McKillian renounced men forever and had a brief, tempestuous affair with Song. Then Song discovered McKillian with Ralston, and Crawford caught her on the rebound, only to be thrown over for Ralston.

Mary Lang let it work itself out, only interfering when it got violent. She herself was not immune to the frenzy but managed to stay aloof from most of it. She went to the shelter with whoever asked her, trying not to play favorites, and gently tried to prod them back to work. As she told McKillian toward the first of the week, "At least we're getting to know one another."

Things did settle down, as Lang had known they would. They entered their second week alone in virtually the same position they had started: no romantic entanglements firmly established. But they knew each other a lot better, were relaxed in the close company of each other, and were supported by a new framework of interlocking friendships. They were much closer to being a team. Rivalries never died out completely, but they no longer dominated the colony. Lang worked them harder than ever, making up for the lost time.

Crawford missed most of the interesting work, being more suited for the semiskilled manual labor that never seemed to be finished. So he and Lang had to learn about the new discoveries at the nightly briefings in the shelter. He remembered nothing about any animal life being discovered, and so when he saw something crawling through the whirligig garden, he dropped everything and started over to it.

At the edge of the garden he stopped, remembering the order from Lang to stay out unless collecting samples. He watched the thing — bug? turtle? — for a moment, satisfied himself that it wouldn't get too far away at its creeping pace, and hurried off to find Song.

"You've got to name it after me," he said as they hurried back

to the garden. "That's my right, isn't it, as the discoverer?"

"Sure," Song said, peering along his pointed finger. "Just show me the damn thing and I'll immortalize you."

The thing was twenty centimeters long, almost round, and dome-shaped. It had a hard shell on top.

"I don't know quite what to do with it," Song admitted. "If it's the only one, I don't dare dissect it, and maybe I shouldn't even touch it."

"Don't worry, there's another over behind you." Now that they were looking for them, they quickly spied four of the creatures. Song took a sample bag from her pouch and held it open in front of the beast. It crawled halfway into the bag, then seemed to think something was wrong. It stopped, but Song nudged it in and picked it up. She peered at the underside and laughed in wonder.

"Wheels," she said. "The thing runs on wheels."

"I don't know where it came from," Song told the group that night. "I don't even quite believe in it. It'd make a nice educational toy for a child, though. I took it apart into twenty or thirty pieces, put it back together, and it still runs. It has a high-impact polystyrene carapace, nontoxic paint on the outside —"

"Not really polystyrene," Ralston interjected.

"... and I guess if you kept changing the batteries it would run forever. And it's *nearly* polystyrene, that's what you said."

"Were you serious about the batteries?" Lang asked.

"I'm not sure. Marty thinks there's a chemical metabolism in the upper part of the shell, which I haven't explored yet. But I can't really say if it's alive in the sense we use. I mean, it runs on *wheels*! It has three wheels, suited for sand, and something that's a cross between a rubber-band drive and a mainspring. Energy is stored in a coiled muscle and released slowly. I don't think it could travel more than a hundred meters. Unless it can re-coil the muscle, and I can't tell how that might be done."

"It sounds very specialized," McKillian said thoughtfully. "Maybe we should be looking for the niche it occupies. The way you describe it, it couldn't function without help from a symbiote. Maybe it fertilizes the plants, like bees, and the plants either donate or are robbed of the power to wind the spring. Did you look for some mechanism the bug could use to steal energy from the rotating gears in the whirligigs?"

"That's what I want to do in the morning," Song said. "Unless Mary will let us take a look

tonight?" She said it hopefully, but without real expectation. Mary Lang shook her head decisively.

"It'll keep. It's *cold* out there, baby."

A new exploration of the whirligig garden the next day revealed several new species, including one more thing that might be an animal. It was a flying creature, the size of a fruit fly, that managed to glide from plant to plant when the wind was down by means of a freely rotating set of blades, like an autogiro.

Crawford and Lang hung around as the scientists looked things over. They were not anxious to get back to the task that had occupied them for the last two weeks: that of bringing the *Podkayne* to a horizontal position without wrecking her. The ship had been rigged with stabilizing cables soon after landing, and provision had been made in the plans to lay the ship on its side in the event of a really big windstorm. But the plans had envisioned a work force of twenty, working all day with a maze of pulleys and gears. It was slow work and could not be rushed. If the ship were to tumble and lose pressure, they didn't have a prayer.

So they welcomed an opportunity to tour fairyland. The place was even more bountiful than the last time Crawford had taken a

look. There were thick vines that Song assured him were running with water, both hot and cold, and various other fluids. There were more of the tall variety of derrick, making the place look like a pastel oilfield.

They had little trouble finding where the matthews came from. They found dozens of twenty-centimeter lumps on the sides of the large derricks. They evidently grew from them like tumors and were released when they were ripe. What they were for was another matter. As well as they could discover, the matthews simply crawled in a straight line until their power ran out. If they were wound up again, they would crawl farther. There were dozens of them lying motionless in the sand within a hundred-meter radius of the garden.

Two weeks of research left them knowing no more. They had to abandon the matthews for the time, as another enigma had cropped up which demanded their attention.

This time Crawford was the last to know. He was called on the radio and found the group all squatted in a circle around a growth in the graveyard.

The graveyard, where they had buried their fifteen dead crewmates on the first day of the disaster, had sprouted with life during the week after the departure of the *Bur-*

roughs. It was separated from the original site of the dome by three hundred meters of blowing sand. So McKillian assumed this second bloom was caused by the water in the bodies of the dead. What they couldn't figure out, was why this patch should differ so radically from the first one.

There were whirligigs in the second patch, but they lacked the variety and disorder of the originals. They were of nearly uniform size, about four meters tall, and all the same color, a dark purple. They had pumped water for two weeks, then stopped. When Song examined them, she reported the bearings were frozen, dried out. They seemed to have lost the plasticizer that kept the structures fluid and living. The water in the pipes was frozen. Though she would not commit herself in the matter, she felt they were dead. In their place was a second network of pipes which wound around the derricks and spread transparent sheets of film to the sunlight, heating the water which circulated through them. The water was being pumped, but not by the now-familiar system of windmills. Spaced along each of the pipes were expansion-contraction pumps with valves very like those in a human heart.

The new marvel was a simple affair in the middle of that living

petrochemical complex. It was a short plant that sprouted up half a meter, then extruded two stalks parallel to the ground. At the end of each stalk was a perfect globe, one gray, one blue. The blue one was much larger than the gray one.

Crawford looked at it briefly, then squatted down beside the rest, wondering what all the fuss was about. Everyone looked very solemn, almost scared.

"You called me over to see this?"

Lang looked over at him, and something in her face made him nervous.

"Look at it, Matt: Really look at it." So he did, feeling foolish, wondering what the joke was. He noticed a white patch near the top of the largest globe. It was streaked, like a glass marble with swirls of opaque material in it. It looked very familiar, he realized, with the hair on the back of his neck starting to stand up.

"It turns," Lang said quietly. "That's why Song noticed it. She came by here one day and it was in a different position than it had been."

"Let me guess," he said, much more calmly than he felt. "The little one goes around the big one, right?"

"Right. And the little one keeps one face turned to the big one. The big one rotates once in twenty-four

hours. It has an axial tilt of twenty-three degrees."

"It's a ... what's the word? Orrery. It's an orrery." Crawford had to stand up and shake his head to clear it.

"It's funny," Lang said, quietly. "I always thought it would be something flashy, or at least obvious. An alien artifact mixed in with cave-man bones, or a spaceship entering the system. I guess I was thinking in terms of pottery shards and atom bombs."

"Well, that all sounds pretty ho-hum to me up against *this*," Song said. "Do you ... do you realize ... what are we talking about here? Evolution, or ... or engineering? Is it the plants themselves that did this, or were they made to do it by whatever built them? Do you see what I'm talking about? I've felt funny about those wheels for a long time. I just won't believe they'd evolve naturally."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I think these plants we've been seeing were designed to be the way they are. They're *too* perfectly adapted, *too* ingenious to have just sprung up in response to the environment." Her eyes seemed to wander, and she stood up and gazed into the valley below them. It was as barren as anything that could be imagined: red and yellow and brown rock outcroppings and tumbled boulders. And in the fore-

ground, the twirling colors of the whirligigs.

"But why this thing?" Crawford asked, pointing to the impossible artifact-plant. "Why a model of the Earth and Moon? And why right here, in the graveyard?"

"Because we were expected," Song said, still looking away from them. "They must have watched the Earth, during the last summer season. I don't know; maybe they even went there. If they did, they would have found men and women like us, hunting and living in caves. Building fires, using clubs, chipping arrowheads. You know more about it than I do, Matt."

"Who are *they*?" Ralston asked. "You think we're going to be meeting some Martians? People? I don't see how. I don't believe it."

"I'm afraid I'm skeptical, too," Lang said. "Surely there must be some other way to explain it."

"No! There's no other way. Oh, not people like us, maybe. Maybe we're seeing them right now, spinning like crazy." They all looked uneasily at the whirligigs. "But I think they're not here yet. I think we're going to see, over the next few years, increasing complexity in these plants and animals as they build up a biome here and get ready for the builders. Think about it. When summer comes, the conditions will be very different. The

atmosphere will be almost as dense as ours, with about the same partial pressure of oxygen. By then, thousands of years from now, these early forms will have vanished. These things are adapted for low pressure, no oxygen, scarce water. The later ones will be adapted to an environment much like ours. And *that's* when we'll see the makers, when the stage is properly set." She sounded almost religious when she said it.

Lang stood up and shook Song's shoulder. Song came slowly back to them and sat down, still blinded by a private vision. Crawford had a glimpse of it himself, and it scared him. And a glimpse of something else, something that could be important but kept eluding him.

"Don't you see?" she went on, calmer now. "It's too pat, too much of a coincidence. This thing is like a ... a headstone, a monument. It's growing right here in the graveyard, from the bodies of our friends. Can you believe in that as just a coincidence?"

Evidently no one could. But likewise, Crawford could see no reason why it should have happened the way it did.

It was painful to leave the mystery for later, but there was nothing to be done about it. They could not bring themselves to uproot the thing, even when five more like it sprouted in the graveyard.

There was a new consensus among them to leave the Martian plants and animals alone. Like nervous atheists, most of them didn't believe Song's theories but had an uneasy feeling of trespassing when they went through the gardens. They felt subconsciously that it might be better to leave them alone in case they turned out to be private property.

And for six months, nothing really new cropped up among the whirligigs. Song was not surprised. She said it supported her theory that these plants were there only as caretakers to prepare the way for the less hardy, air-breathing varieties to come. They would warm the soil and bring the water closer to the surface, then disappear when their function was over.

The three scientists allowed their studies to slide as it became more important to provide for the needs of the moment. The dome material was weakening as the temporary patches lost strength, and so a new home was badly needed. They were dealing daily with slow leaks, any of which could become a major blowout.

The *Podkayne* was lowered to the ground, and sadly decommissioned. It was a bad day for Mary Lang, the worst since the day of the blowout. She saw it as a necessary but infamous thing to do to a proud flying machine. She brooded about

it for a week, becoming short-tempered and almost unapproachable. Then she asked Crawford to join her in the private shelter. It was the first time she had asked any of the other four. They lay in each other's arms for an hour, and Lang quietly sobbed on his chest. Crawford was proud that she had chosen him for her companion when she could no longer maintain her tough, competent show of strength. In a way, it was a strong thing to do, to expose weakness to the one person among the four who might possibly be her rival for leadership. He did not betray the trust. In the end, she was comforting him.

After that day Lang was ruthless in gutting the old *Podkayne*. She supervised the ripping out of the motors to provide more living space, and only Crawford saw what it was costing her. They drained the fuel tanks and stored the fuel in every available container they could scrounge. It would be useful later for heating, and for recharging batteries. They managed to convert plastic packing crates into fuel containers by lining them with sheets of the double-walled material the whirligigs used to heat water. They were nervous at this vandalism, but had no other choice. They kept looking nervously at the graveyard as they ripped up meter-square sheets of it.

They ended up with a long

cylindrical home, divided into two small sleeping rooms, a community room, and a laboratory-storehouse-workshop in the old fuel tank. Crawford and Lang spent the first night together in the "penthouse," the former cockpit, the only room with windows.

Lying there wide awake on the rough mattress, side by side in the warm air with Mary Lang, whose black leg was a crooked line of shadow laying across his body, looking up through the port at the sharp, unwinking stars — with nothing done yet about the problems of oxygen, food, and water for the years ahead and no assurance he would live out the night on a planet determined to kill him — Crawford realized he had never been happier in his life.

On a day exactly eight months after the disaster, two discoveries were made. One was in the whirligig garden and concerned a new plant that was bearing what might be fruit. They were clusters of grape-sized white balls, very hard and fairly heavy. The second discovery was made by Lucy McKillian and concerned the absence of an event that up to that time had been as regular as the full moon.

"I'm pregnant," she announced to them that night, causing Song to delay her examination of the white fruit.

It was not unexpected; Lang had been waiting for it to happen since the night the *Burroughs* left. But she had not worried about it. Now she must decide what to do.

"I was afraid that might happen," Crawford said. "What do we do, Mary?"

"Why don't you tell me what you think? You're the survival expert. Are babies a plus or a minus in our situation?"

"I'm afraid I have to say they're a liability. Lucy will be needing extra food during her pregnancy, and afterward, and it will be an extra mouth to feed. We can't afford the strain on our resources." Lang said nothing, waiting to hear from McKillian.

"Now wait a minute. What about all this line about 'colonists' you've been feeding us ever since we got stranded here? Who ever heard of a colony without babies? If we don't grow, we stagnate, right? We *have* to have children." She looked back and forth from Lang to Crawford, her face expressing formless doubts.

"We're in special circumstances, Lucy," Crawford explained. "Sure, I'd be all for it if we were better off. But we can't be sure we can even provide for ourselves, much less a child. I say we can't afford children until we're established."

"Do you want the child, Lucy?"

Lang asked quietly.

McKillian didn't seem to know what she wanted. "No. I ... but, yes. Yes, I guess I do." She looked at them, pleading for them to understand.

"Look, I've never had one, and never planned to. I'm thirty-four years old and never, never felt the lack. I've always wanted to go places, and you can't with a baby. But I never planned to become a colonist on Mars, either. I ... things have changed, don't you see? I've been depressed." She looked around, and Song and Ralston were nodding sympathetically. Relieved to see that she was not the only one feeling the oppression, she went on, more strongly. "I think if I go another day like yesterday and the day before — and today — I'll end up screaming. It seems so pointless, collecting all that information, for what?"

"I agree with Lucy," Ralston said, surprisingly. Crawford had thought he would be the only one immune to the inevitable despair of the castaway. Ralston in his laboratory was the picture of carefree detachment, existing only to observe.

"So do I," Lang said, ending the discussion. But she explained her reasons to them.

"Look at it this way, Matt. No matter how we stretch our supplies, they won't take us through the next

four years. We either find a way of getting what we need from what's around us, or we all die. And if we find a way to do it, then what does it matter how many of us there are? At the most, this will push our deadline a few weeks or a month closer, the day we have to be self-supporting."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," Crawford admitted.

"But that's not important. The important thing is what you said from the first, and I'm surprised you didn't see it. If we're a colony, we expand. By definition. Historian, what happened to colonies that failed to expand?"

"Don't rub it in."

"They died out. I know that much. People, we're not intrepid space explorers anymore. We're not the career men and women we set out to be. Like it or not, and I suggest we start liking it, we're pioneers trying to live in a hostile environment. The odds are very much against us, and we're not going to be here forever, but like Matt said, we'd better plan as if we were. Comment?"

There was none, until Song spoke up, thoughtfully.

"I think a baby around here would be fun. Two should be twice as much fun. I think I'll start. Come on, Marty."

"Hold on, honey," Lang said, dryly. "If you conceive now, I'll be

forced to order you to abort. We have the chemicals for it, you know."

"That's discrimination."

"Maybe so. But just because we're colonists doesn't mean we have to behave like rabbits. A pregnant woman will have to be removed from the work force at the end of her term, and we can only afford one at a time. After Lucy has hers, then come ask me again. But watch Lucy carefully, dear. Have you really thought what it's going to take? Have you tried to visualize her getting into her pressure suit in six or seven months?"

From their expressions, it was plain that neither Song nor McKillian had thought of it.

"Right," Lang went on. "It'll be literal confinement for her, right here in the *Poddy*. Unless we can rig something for her, which I seriously doubt. Still want to go through with it, Lucy?"

"Can I have a while to think it over?"

"Sure. You have about two months. After that, the chemicals aren't safe."

"I'd advise you to do it," Crawford said. "I know my opinion means nothing after shooting my mouth off. I know I'm a fine one to talk; I won't be cooped up in here. But the colony needs it. We've all felt it: the lack of a direction or a drive to keep going. I think we'd get

it back if you went through with this."

McKillian tapped her teeth thoughtfully with the tip of a finger.

"You're right," she said. "Your opinion *doesn't* mean anything." She slapped his knee delightedly when she saw him blush. "I think it's yours, by the way. And I think I'll go ahead and have it."

The penthouse seemed to have gone to Lang and Crawford as an unasked-for prerogative. It just became a habit, since they seemed to have developed a bond between them and none of the other three complained. Neither of the other women seemed to be suffering in any way. So Lang left it at that. What went on between the three of them was of no concern to her as long as it stayed happy.

Lang was leaning back in Crawford's arms, trying to decide if she wanted to make love again, when a gunshot rang out in the *Podkayne*.

She had given a lot of thought to the last emergency, which she still saw as partly a result of her lag in responding. This time she was through the door almost before the reverberations had died down, leaving Crawford to nurse the leg she had stepped on in her haste.

She was in time to see McKillian and Kalston hurrying into the lab at the back of the ship. There was a red light flashing, but she

quickly saw it was not the worst it could be; the pressure light still glowed green. It was the smoke detector. The smoke was coming from the lab.

She took a deep breath and plunged in, only to collide with Ralston as he came out, dragging Song. Except for a dazed expression and a few cuts, Song seemed to be all right. Crawford and McKillian joined them as they lay her on the bunk.

"It was one of the fruit," she said, gasping for breath and coughing. "I was heating it in a beaker, turned away, and it blew. I guess it sort of stunned me. The next thing I knew, Marty was carrying me out here. Hey, I have to get back in there! There's another one ... it could be dangerous, and the damage, I have to check on that—" She struggled to get up but Lang held her down.

"You take it easy. What's this about another one?"

"I had it clamped down, and the drill — did I turn it on, or not? I can't remember. I was after a core sample. You'd better take a look. If the drill hits whatever made the other one explode, it might go off."

"I'll get it," McKillian said, turning toward the lab.

"You'll stay right here," Lang barked. "We know there's not enough power in them to hurt the ship, but it could kill you if it hit

you right. We stay right here until it goes off. The hell with the damage. And shut that door, quick!"

Before they could shut it they heard a whistling, like a teakettle coming to boil, then a rapid series of clangs. A tiny white ball came through the doorway and bounced off three walls. It moved almost faster than they could follow. It hit Crawford on the arm, then fell to the floor where it gradually skittered to a stop. The hissing died away, and Crawford picked it up. It was lighter than it had been. There was a pinhole drilled in one side. The pinhole was cold when he touched it with his fingers. Startled, thinking he was burned, he stuck his finger in his mouth, then sucked on it absently long after he knew the truth.

"These 'fruit' are full of compressed gas," he told them. "We have to open up another, carefully this time. I'm almost afraid to say what gas I think it is, but I have a hunch that our problems are solved."

By the time the rescue expedition arrived, no one was calling it that. There had been the little matter of a long, brutal war with the Palestinian Empire, and a growing conviction that the survivors of the First Expedition had not had any chance in the first place. There had been no time for luxuries

like space travel beyond the moon and no billions of dollars to invest while the world's energy policies were being debated in the Arabian Desert with tactical nuclear weapons:

When the ship finally did show up, it was no longer a NASA ship. It was sponsored by the fledgling International Space Agency. Its crew came from all over Earth. Its drive was new, too, and a lot better than the old one. As usual, war had given research a kick in the pants. Its mission was to take up the Martian exploration where the first expedition had left off and, incidentally, to recover the remains of the twenty Americans for return to Earth.

The ship came down with an impressive show of flame and billowing sand, three kilometers from Tharsis Base.

The captain, an Indian named Singh, got his crew started on erecting the permanent buildings, then climbed into a crawler with three officers for the trip to Tharsis. It was almost exactly twelve Earth-years since the departure of the *Edgar Rice Burroughs*.

The *Podkayne* was barely visible behind a network of multicolored vines. The vines were tough enough to frustrate their efforts to push through and enter the old ship. But both lock doors were open, and sand had drifted in rippled waves

through the opening. The stern of the ship was nearly buried.

Singh told his people to stop, and he stood back admiring the complexity of the life in such a barren place. There were whirligigs twenty meters tall scattered around him, with vanes broad as the wings of a cargo aircraft.

"We'll have to get cutting tools from the ship," he told his crew. "They're probably in there. What a place this is! I can see we're going to be busy." He walked along the edge of the dense growth, which now covered several acres. He came to a section where the predominant color was purple. It was strangely different from the rest of the garden. There were tall whirligig derricks but they were frozen, unmoving. And covering all the derricks was a translucent network of ten-centimeter-wide strips of plastic, which was thick enough to make an impenetrable barrier. It was like a cobweb made of flat, thin material instead of fibrous spider-silk. It bulged outward between all the crossbraces of the whirligigs.

"Hello, can you hear me now?"

Singh jumped, then turned around, looked at the three officers. They were looking as surprised as he was.

"Hello, hello, hello? No good on this one, Mary. Want me to try another channel?"

"Wait a moment. I can hear

you. Where are you?"

"Hey, he hears me! Uh, that is, this is Song Sue Lee, and I'm right in front of you. If you look real hard into the webbing, you can just make me out. I'll wave my arms. See?"

Singh thought he saw some movement when he pressed his face to the translucent web. The web resisted his hands, pushing back like an inflated balloon.

"I think I see you." The enormity of it was just striking him. He kept his voice under tight control, as his officers rushed up around him, and managed not to stammer. "Are you well? Is there anything we can do?"

There was a pause. "Well, now that you mention it, you might have come on time. But that's water through the pipes, I guess. If you have some toys or something, it might be nice. The stories I've told little Billy of all the nice things you people were going to bring! There's going to be no living with him, let me tell you."

This was getting out of hand for Captain Singh.

"Ms. Song, how can we get in there with you?"

"Sorry. Go to your right about ten meters, where you see the steam coming from the web. There, see it?" They did, and as they looked, a section of the webbing was pulled open and a rush of warm air almost

blew them over. Water condensed out of it in their faceplates, and suddenly they couldn't see very well.

"Hurry, hurry, step in! We can't keep it open too long." They groped their way in, scraping frost away with their hands. The web closed behind them, and they were standing in the center of a very complicated network made of single strands of the webbing material. Singh's pressure gauge read 30 millibars.

Another section opened up and they stepped through it. After three more gates were passed, the temperature and pressure were nearly Earth-normal. And they were standing beside a small oriental woman with skin tanned almost black. She had no clothes on, but seemed adequately dressed in a brilliant smile that dimpled her mouth and eyes. Her hair was streaked with gray. She would be — Singh stopped to consider — forty-one years old.

"This way," she said, beckoning them into a tunnel formed from more strips of plastic. They twisted around through a random maze, going through more gates that opened when they neared them, sometimes getting on their knees when the clearance lowered. They heard the sound of children's voices.

They reached what must have

been the center of the maze and found the people everyone had given up on. Eighteen of them. The children became very quiet and stared solemnly at the new arrivals, while the other four adults

The adults were standing separately around the space while tiny helicopters flew around them, wrapping them from head to toe in strips of webbing like human may-poles.

"Of course we don't know if we would have made it without the assist from the Martians," Mary Lang was saying, from her perch on an orange thing that might have been a toadstool. "Once we figured out what was happening here in the graveyard, there was no need to explore alternative ways of getting food, water, and oxygen. The need just never arose. We were provided for."

She raised her feet so a group of three gawking women from the ship could get by. They were letting them come through in groups of five every hour. They didn't dare open the outer egress more often than that, and Lang was wondering if it was too often. The place was crowded, and the kids were nervous. But better to have the crew satisfy their curiosity in here where we can watch them, she reasoned, then have them messing things up outside.

The inner nest was free-form. The New Amsterdamites had allowed it to stay pretty much the way the whirlibirds had built it, only taking down an obstruction here and there to allow humans to move around. It was a maze of gauzy walls and plastic struts, with clear plastic pipes running all over and carrying fluids of pale blue, pink, gold, and wine. Metal spigots from the *Podkayne* had been inserted in some of the pipes. McKillian was kept busy refilling glasses for the visitors who wanted to sample the antifreeze solution that was fifty percent ethanol. It was good stuff, Captain Singh reflected as he drained his third glass, and that was what he still couldn't understand.

He was having trouble framing the questions he wanted to ask, and he realized he'd had too much to drink. The spirit of celebration, the rejoicing at finding these people here past any hope; one could hardly stay aloof from it. But he refused a fourth drink regretfully.

"I can understand the drink," he said, carefully. "Ethanol is a simple compound and could fit into many different chemistries. But it's hard to believe that you've survived eating the food these plants produced for you."

"Not once you understand what this graveyard is and why it became what it did," Song said. She was

sitting cross-legged on the floor nursing her youngest, Ethan.

"First you have to understand that all this you see," she waved around at the meters of hanging soft-sculpture, causing Ethan to nearly lose the nipple, "was designed to contain beings who are no more adapted to *this* Mars than we are. They need warmth, oxygen at fairly high pressures, and free water. It isn't here now, but it can be created by properly designed plants. They engineered these plants to be triggered by the first signs of free water and to start building places for them to live while they waited for full summer to come. When it does, this whole planet will bloom. Then we can step outside without wearing suits or carrying airberries."

"Yes, I see," Singh said. "And it's all very wonderful, almost too much to believe." He was distracted for a moment, looking up to the ceiling where the airberries — white spheres about the size of bowling balls — hung in clusters from the pipes that supplied them with high-pressure oxygen.

"I'd like to see that process from the start," he said. "Where you suit up for the outside, I mean."

"We were suiting up when you got here. It takes about half an hour; so we couldn't get out in time to meet you."

"How long are those ... suits good for?"

"About a day," Crawford said. "You have to destroy them to get out of them. The plastic strips don't cut well, but there's another specialized animal that eats that type of plastic. It's recycled into the system. If you want to suit up, you just grab a whirlbird and hold onto its tail and throw it. It starts spinning as it flies, and wraps the end product around you. It takes some practice, but it works. The stuff sticks to itself, but not to us. So you spin several layers, letting each one dry, then hook up an airberry, and you're inflated and insulated."

"Marvelous," Singh said, truly impressed. He had seen the tiny whirlbirds weaving the suits, and the other ones, like small slugs, eating them away when the colonists saw they wouldn't need them. "But without some sort of exhaust, you wouldn't last long. How is that accomplished?"

"We use the breather valves from our old suits," McKillian said. "Either the plants that grow valves haven't come up yet or we haven't been smart enough to recognize them. And the insulation isn't perfect. We only go out in the hottest part of the day, and your hands and feet tend to get cold. But we manage."

Singh realized he had strayed from his original question.

"But what about the food? Surely it's too much to expect for these Martians to eat the same things we do. Wouldn't you think so?"

"We sure did, and we were lucky to have Marty Ralston along. He kept telling us the fruits in the graveyard were edible by humans. Fats, starches, proteins; all identical to the ones we brought along. The clue was in the orrery, of course."

Lang pointed to the twin globes in the middle of the room, still keeping perfect Earth time.

"It was a beacon. We figured that out when we saw they grew only in the graveyard. But what was it telling us? We felt it meant that we were expected. Song felt that from the start, and we all came to agree with her. But we didn't realize just how much they had prepared for us until Marty started analyzing the fruits and nutrients here.

"Listen, these Martians — and I can see from your look that you still don't really believe in them, but you will if you stay here long enough — they know genetics. They really know it. We have a thousand theories about what they may be like, and I won't bore you with them yet, but this is one thing we do know. They can build anything they need, make a blueprint in DNA, encapsulate it in a spore

and bury it, knowing exactly what will come up in forty thousand years. When it starts to get cold here and they know the cycle's drawing to an end, they seed the planet with the spores and ... do something. Maybe they die, or maybe they have some other way of passing the time. But they know they'll return.

"We can't say how long they've been prepared for a visit from us. Maybe only this cycle; maybe twenty cycles ago. Anyway, at the last cycle they buried the kind of spores that would produce these little gismos." She tapped the blue ball representing the Earth with one foot.

"They triggered them to be activated only when they encountered certain different conditions. Maybe they knew exactly what it would be; maybe they only provided for a likely range of possibilities. Song thinks they've visited us, back in the Stone Age. In some ways it's easier to believe than the alternative. That way they'd know our genetic structure and what kinds of food we'd eat, and could prepare.

" 'Cause if they didn't visit us, they must have prepared other spores. Spores that would analyze new proteins and be able to duplicate them. Further than that, some of the plants might have been able to copy certain genetic material if they encountered any. Take a look

at that pipe behind you." Singh turned and saw a pipe about as thick as his arm. It was flexible, and had a swelling in it that continuously pulsed in expansion and contraction.

"Take that bulge apart and you'd be amazed at the resemblance to a human heart. So there's another significant fact; this place started out with whirligigs, but later modified itself to use human heart pumps from the genetic information *taken from the bodies of the men and women we buried.*" She paused to let that sink in, then went on with a slightly bemused smile.

"The same thing for what we eat and drink. That liquor you drank, for instance. It's half alcohol, and that's probably what it would have been without the corpses. But the rest of it is very similar to hemoglobin. It's sort of like fermented blood. Human blood."

Singh was glad he had refused the fourth drink. One of his crew members quietly put his glass down.

"I've never eaten human flesh," Lang went on, "but I think I know what it must taste like. Those vines to your right; we strip off the outer part and eat the meat underneath. It tastes good. I wish we could cook it, but we have nothing to burn and couldn't risk it with the high oxygen count, anyway."

Singh and everyone else was silent for a while. He found he really was beginning to believe in the Martians. The theory seemed to cover a lot of otherwise inexplicable facts.

Mary Lang sighed, slapped her thighs, and stood up. Like all the others, she was nude and seemed totally at home with it. None of them had worn anything but a Martian pressure suit for eight years. She ran her hand lovingly over the gossamer wall, the wall that had provided her and her fellow colonists and their children protection from the cold and the thin air for so long. He was struck by her easy familiarity with what seemed to him outlandish surroundings. She looked at home. He couldn't imagine her anywhere else.

He looked at the children. One wide-eyed little girl of eight years was kneeling at his feet. As his eyes fell on her, she smiled tentatively and took his hand.

"Did you bring any bubblegum?" the girl asked.

He smiled at her. "No, honey, but maybe there's some in the ship." She seemed satisfied. She would wait to experience the wonders of Earthly science.

"We were provided for," Mary Lang said, quietly. "They knew we were coming and they altered their plans to fit us in." She looked back to Singh. "It would have happened

even without the blowout and the burials. The same sort of thing was happening around the *Podkayne*, too, triggered by our waste; urine and feces and such. I don't know if it would have tasted quite as good in the food department, but it would have sustained life."

Singh stood up. He was moved, but did not trust himself to show it adequately. So he sounded rather abrupt, though polite.

"I suppose you'll be anxious to go to the ship," he said. "You're going to be a tremendous help. You know so much of what we were sent here to find out. And you'll be quite famous when you get back to Earth. Your back pay should add up to quite a sum."

There was a silence, then it was ripped apart by Lang's huge laugh. She was joined by the others, and the children, who didn't know what they were laughing about but enjoyed the break in the tension.

"Sorry, Captain. That was rude. But we're not going back."

Singh looked at each of the adults and saw no trace of doubt. And he was mildly surprised to find that the statement did not startle him.

"I won't take that as your final decision," he said. "As you know, we'll be here six months. If at the end of that time any of you want to

go, you're still citizens of Earth."

"We are? You'll have to brief us on the political situation back there. We were United States citizens when we left. But it doesn't matter. You won't get any takers, though we appreciate the fact that you came. It's nice to know we weren't forgotten." She said it with total assurance, and the others were nodding. Singh was uncomfortably aware that the idea of a rescue mission had died out only a few years after the initial tragedy. He and his ship were here now only to explore.

Lang sat back down and patted the ground around her, ground that was covered in a multiple layer of the Martian pressure-tight web, the kind of web that would have been made only by warm-blooded, oxygen-breathing, water-economy beings who needed protection for their bodies until the full bloom of summer.

"We *like* it here. It's a good place to raise a family, not like Earth the last time I was there. And it couldn't be much better now, right after another war. And we can't leave, even if we wanted to." She flashed him a dazzling smile and patted the ground again.

"The Martians should be showing up any time now. And we aim to thank them."



The past twenty years in America have seen a lot of apostasies in and around the sf fold, uneasy departures into the grim remunerative larger world outside, noisy reunions at conventions and conferences, everyone dressed in sheep's clothing for fellowship. It was just twenty years ago that Alfred Bester shot off into the night to hype for *Holiday* and other like organs — witness the despicably smooth-tongued piece on Asimov he includes in the second of his new volumes of collected stories — and just a couple of years ago that he made a large-scale though curiously insecure return with the serializing of what's now known as *The Computer Connection* in the States and *Extro* in Britain and, for all I know (he's always had trouble with titles) *Groupie!* in Hong Kong, a novel whose real genuine authentic Besterian protagonist (the possessed Indian scientist) is supplanted by a lame I-narrator who inflicts upon us all the new clichés of the recently dominant American Pals book, of which a bit more later. Perhaps as a professional writer Mr. Bester was trying to accommodate himself to what he sensed was the mood of the day within the fold by chatting away at us in a pretty good imitation of a Samuel R. Delany Paranormals Club Clambake — see *Dhalgren* for passages

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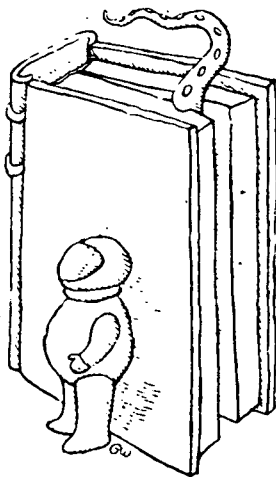
The Light Fantastic, Alfred Bester, Berkley/Putnam, \$7.95

Star Light, Star Bright, Alfred Bester, Berkley/Putnam, \$7.95

Cinnabar, Edward Bryant, Macmillan, \$7.95

The Lifeship, Harry Harrison and Gordon R. Dickson, Harper & Row, \$7.95

Children of Dune, Frank Herbert, Berkley/Putnam, \$8.95



of American Pals psychic group-propriety at its squaggiest — but if so, the attempt proved nearly disastrous. The obsessive pazzazz of language and narrative invention that has always marked Bester goes sour in *The Computer Connection*, eats like spilled acid into the jumbled confusedly hectic tale he barely allows himself to tell, reeks of fundamentally displaced energies. Trying to charm, *Groupiel* devours itself.

Nor does the dedication — “For the fans — for the wonderful demented fans” — to the first of Mr. Bester’s two new volumes of stories (each ineptly titled) really augur very well, either, being too ingratiating by a long shot, too nice, too lily-livered, too entrepreneurial; a dedication like that has more the ring of a thank-you from the organizer of a clambake than of a message from an author deep in his devouring craft. Ultimately the trouble with this sort of posture on the part of an author lies in the way it can distort the relation between that author and his audience, often leading to an unvoiced, perhaps unconscious, certainly illicit assumption that the fan — that the fold — coinhabits the actual book and is part of its actual rhetorical voice. Sufficiently internalized, so that it trojan-horses the author’s craft, this session fallacy is one of the strands that weave and

warp together to make up the American Pals novel, with all its sins of unearned togetherness.

Accompanied by generally informative, sometimes slightly smarmy, often hilarious comments, the stories themselves are another matter, most of them well-known from previous Bester collections and from anthologies, but welcome in assembled form. Unfortunately, however, the two volumes, though numbered consecutively, seem to have been conceived as separate endeavors. Each volume runs the same gamut of years, 1940 approximately to a year or so ago, but in neither volume are the stories arranged according to any principles I could work out. Lacking any chronological structure, therefore, Bester’s comments have a scattier, more jumbled effect than they should have; the reader is forced to skip back and forth and from volume to volume attempting to give shape to the years. Double-day’s series (*The Early Asimov*, *The Early Williamson*, and so on) are a shining counter-example, prove it’s not impossible, or even very expensive, to make sense of things.

A list might help. *The Light Fantastic* contains “Hell is Forever,” a long fantasy from 1942, exorbitantly and gratifyingly wasteful of ideas, and beneath the woodenness of its initial premise (the only sign of a newish writer)

very Besterian indeed; then a batch of familiar tales from the peak period of the early and mid 50s, "5,271,009," which is one of a handful of genuinely funny sf stories, "Fondly Fahrenheit," "The Men Who Murdered Mohammed," and "Disappearing Act"; then a tiny, rather lousy bye-blow from his 60s Avignon in the slicks, "Ms Found in a Champagne Bottle"; and "The Four-Hour Fugue" from 1974, an entirely competent return to the mode and concerns of the prolific years. *Star Light, Star Bright* starts from go again, though not in any order, and includes "Adam and No Eve" from 1941, another story with a lot of woodenness and contrivance in its establishing shots, in this case (I've always thought about this familiar item) fatally, nor does the destruction of point-of-view consistency in the last sentence give off much of a thrill anymore; then a further batch from the 50s, "Time is the Traitor," "Oddy and Id," "Hobson's Choice," "Star Light, Star Bright," and "Of Time and Third Avenue"; then two singletons, "The Pi Man" from 1959, somewhat rewritten for this edition, generally to its betterment, and with a more open ending, as befits our emancipated times, and "They Don't Make Life Like They Used To" from 1963, whose contained hilarity plays so fruitfully on the

repressed sexuality of the sf of the time that I found it still arousing, after a decade of private parts; "Something Up There Likes Me" from 1973, a rather frail sidekick of *Groupie!*; and some recent non-fiction including the dubious piece on Asimov already mentioned and a final autobiographical sketch, conducted with cheer and considerable tact, but without (nor has anyone the right to ask it) deciphering any tattoos beneath the skin.

Tattoos beneath the skin coerce most of the characters in most of the 50s stories, as they do in his novels of the period. His characters are the actings-out of compulsive stigmata-bearing unconscious drives, of their tattoos. His view of man is autumnal, and much of Twentieth century literature shares with him a point-of-view that is technically ironic, technically "superior" to its subject matter. Out of this common material and common import, however, Bester makes sf stories through a kind of sleight-of-hand: The worlds in which his characters operate are *themselves* radically shaped by his hagridden Gully Foyles and Oddys and the rest of them; dominating and coercing and obsessing the real worlds about them, they engender sf situations by the binding extravagance of their natures. Simple enough, but heady in its implications, for this transforming of the

internal into the external comes close to defining the deep structure of all genre creations. Understandably enough, most sf writers remain content with the vivid, entertaining, kinetic world of externalized dreams, where schizoid ex-marines remember their superpowers just in time to save the galaxy, and we're all American Pals together beneath the skin, jawing away. But Alfred Bester's peak novels and stories (most of the 50s batch in these collections) are different. They are passable excursions into the demonology of the self; and they are fine adventures in the light of day, Technicolor, torrential. More important than that, however, their pyrotechnics work as an explanatory dialogue between the inner and the after worlds. For that reason — and because the man can write so well when he's not being a chum, or a posh journalist — they are about the best sf ever published. They define the genre they inhabit.

Edward Bryant presents us with a second book of stories, all in a row, chronologically ordered, the earlier ones quite brilliant at times, the later ones drawn and quartered by Killer Plot. *Cinnabar* — the stories are all about a city at the end of time on the ocean by a desert in a dream of Southern California about as far from reality as Southern California is from the rest of us

and in the same direction — kicks off promisingly with frissons galore, multiplex images and aperçus, half-seen and half-understood characters and episodes, marvels interbreeding with horrors, all mounting to a vision of the entranced plasticity of a life shaped by will and desire alone. In these earlier stories of the sequence, the nature of Cinnabar the city seems blessedly elusive; like life in a foreign realm, you catch ambiguously revealing glimpses of multifariousness — veils within veils — at the corner of the eye. There are a few coy-baroque tics, mainly the use of "cinematic" devices that stop the story dead while claiming to speed it up, freeze-frames, for instance, or lists that serve as a sorry analogue of cuts: The first thing Blank saw was 1) another Blank; the second thing he saw was 2) a razor blade; the third thing he saw was 3) a bleeding Blank. And so forth. But generally the first half of *Cinnabar* stands comparison with Bryant's earlier collection of stories, the brilliant *Among the Dead*.

Unfortunately the later stories — later both in time of writing and in the "history" of Cinnabar — flatten out disastrously, the horizon shrinks to the known, the plot thickens, becoming fatally explanatory, and a few chatty characters inhabit center stage, where they set

about communing with each other; it is here the vitiating overgregariousness sets in, just as though the citizens of Cinnabar represented a not overly-imaginative *roman-a-clef* rendering of participants at a writer's workshop. Workshops are demanding and seductive experiences; one imagines a kind of rhetoric of community among their participants that both implies an external enemy (the cultural establishment, or the local police, or those who don't read sf) and grants an internal dispensation to cast off the trammels of individuation and *meld*, guys. External enemies make for strange bedfellows. When adolescents meet sf stars in heightened venues within the context of a genre that protects its own, maybe it's not surprising that American Pals stories flood the market with their easy optimism about the value of plebiscitary selfhood. Unsurprising, but deleterious all the same, because claims that community is attainable on the cheap, and that public confession of character traits absolves one of all consequent entailments and integrates you into a nest of chums, makes for bad fiction. In stories that expound or succumb to this oceanic fellowship, antagonism and tragedy are externalized, blamed on cartoon enemies (like the males in Joanna Russ' otherwise exemplary and moving *The Female Man*), while any differ-

ences within the group are "solved" by issue-dodging uses of paranormal empathy (see Vonda McIntyre's new novel), or telepathy, or sex, shared stigmata, nostalgia. When Tourmaline Hayes and Obregon and Harry Vincent Blake make it together late in *Cinnabar* at enormous length, you can feel the author beginning to coast and tootle. You can feel the magical *difficulty* of *Cinnabar* dissolve into a series of routine variations on the theme that Intercourse is a Real Nice Clambake, as Snoopy might have put it. And you are ready (Nature abhors a vacuum) for plot-tiness to take over, too, so that by the time Terminex the ultimate computer *explains all* to the surviving indistinguishables, at the end of the book, the complex vision Mr. Bryant began with has suffered the death of paraphrase. A story that can be paraphrased is a lot of rote. It's a sad lazy ending for an author so amply capable of depths and shades beyond Terminex's terminal patter.

— With my brains and your brawn, said Gordon R. Dickson to Harry Harrison, I betcha we can write about the best space opera you ever read, and in three days too, numbskull.

— With my brains and your brawn, said Harry Harrison to Gordon R. Dickson, I betcha we

can write about the best space opera you ever read, and in two days, lunkhead.

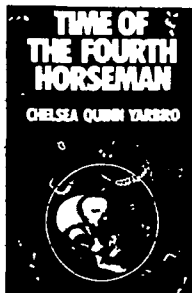
And so the author of *Dorsai!* and the author of *Make Room*, *Make Room* got down to work, and ended up with *The Lifeship*, a space opera. All brawn. Their model was an interesting one: Casts of interesting characters trapped in a lifeboat or a magic mountain have made the careers of more than one neat playwright, neat hack, and Thomas Mann. It's a model designed to make it easy for the microcosm (the lifeboat) to mirror and comment upon the macrocosm (the world). But it's the essence and joy of that model that it's a metaphor, prismatic, fruitful. When you add to it the fact that the characters whose interactions in the lifeship we're about to monitor not only metaphorically reflect the outer universe but also (this being a space opera) have a very good chance of actually *changing* all of human society for starters and the rest of the galaxy for dinner, then you have an open field for the worst kinds of misplaced concreteness, with analogies changed into implausible coincidences, accidents of plot into the keys of the kingdom, and so forth.

Nor do Dickson and Harrison miss many chances to cash in on this open door to hilarity and chaos. Every single character trap-

ped between the stars in the lifeship seems to have at least one secret identity, two secret missions, three guilty deeds to atone for, four threats of death to dodge, five Post-catastrophe Earth has gone rigidly feudal, with Adelman (nobles) and low-statured greyish arbites (workers) making up society; why pig-German is used to describe them I couldn't work out. Adelman Giles blows up a spaceship run by the space-dwelling Albenareth (Poul Anderson out of Tolkien) so that it will be forced to crash-land on a planet where a rebel Adelman is hiding who wants to liberate the arbites right away instead of manana, but an arbite (really a cop in disguise) sets off a second explosion, forcing a select group of survivors into a lifeship, Giles, the secret cop, a batch of conspiring arbites, and a couple of Albenareth, one of whom dies, leaving a pregnant female who goes into shock when a drug-crazed arbite eats her navigation manual for the cellulose (the coincidence of having two separate species, one of them spacefaring, both using cellulose-based paper defies explanation and gets none), motivating Adelman Giles ('cause an Adelman's got to do) to dig deep into that Gordon R. Dickson-patented dark irresistible flaming core of inexpugnable humanity that *always* distinguishes men from Albenareth

and other aliens, and to pilot the lifeship by the seat of his inexpugnable pants to safety on the planet he'd been aiming at in the first place, where all the conflicts between Adelman and arbites and between men and Albenareth are taken smartly in hand, so that the future looks rosy for both species at last. The whole farrago is narrated with a dead pan and a limp wrist; the two authors have done so much better on their own that one has to wonder just what five secret motives possessed them to write this thing, what six deadly threats they used to get it published

It is early days yet to understand Frank Herbert, nor does *Children of Dune* go very far on first reading — the first of several, I suspect — to explain that sense of combined bemusement and involvement and exhilaration he can command through whole chapters — indeed whole books — of extraordinary opacity. Like *Dune Messiah*, though unlike *Dune*, this concluding volume of the trilogy is mostly talk — engrossing, infuriating, elusive, gnomic, inspissated, delphic, pregnant, self-absorbed talk; talk about the changing ecology and melancholy fate of the planet Dune or Arrakis where almost all the action takes place, talk about the Bene Gesserit breeding program and Jessica the Queen



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Mother who drops in to represent it, talk about Paul Muad'dib-Atreides who returns diminished from the dead as a blind anonymous prophet of decay and a gadfly of the Church established in his name, talk about his twin children Leto and Ghanima who are the novel's hidden protagonists (but who are never long enough together to become Pals), talk about his sister Alia who has become an Abomination (there does seem to be an unfortunate tendency throughout the trilogy for women to be punished for self-assertion, with poor Alia being described as "a gloating, almost masculine figure," and her guards as "amazons") and is consequently possessed by the "ghost" of Baron Vladimir Harkonnen, volume one's main nasty; talk about gholas (from volume 2), about loyalty, betrayal, palace politics, geriatric spice addiction, jihads, corrupt priests; talk about the slackening of the Fremen way of life as plants begin to bloom in the desert too soon: Much of it couched in an arcane translatoresque out of *The Prophet* (dam) by *Arabia Deserta* (sire): And all of it irradiated with the thought of decay, decline, failure, mortality, loss, loss. Perhaps uniquely to sf, *Children of Dune* is a deeply and convincingly pessimistic novel about the impossible cost of attempting to master the universe and all that it inherit.

As in *Dune Messiah*, a relatively clear-cut story does eventually emerge to summarize, perhaps a little vulgarly, everything that has gone before in talk. Alia has been declared regent of her brother's empire and jihad until the coming of age of Leto and Ghanima, both of whom (like Alia herself) born sentient and in communication with their genetic predecessors (see *Dune Messiah* for details). By now a Harkonnen tool, Alia tries to destroy what she has been given to defend. Leto realizes that he must bite the bullet his father had "died" rather than face up to, arranges his own faked death, and goes into the desert of Dune to become "the Golden Path," the embodiment of an imposed, thousand-year, para-jihad imperial peace. He achieves this embodiment through merging his human nature and body with that of the sandtrout (the great sand worm's imago), acquiring super powers, and wiping the slate clean of the obsessive internecine past. As the novel closes, we know that the deserts will continue to disappear, that the humans whose fates — and discussions — we have followed for so long will become ancillaries to Leto's strange bleak regime, and that the myth of Muad'dib will be closed down. It is a sad close to the long dark epic, but somehow very bracing. Tragedy is that.

Joanna Russ is now teaching at the University of Colorado, from which she sends us an occasional essay on sf books and a rare short story, most recently this fine and ultimately very moving tale about ...

How Dorothy Kept Away The Spring

by JOANNA RUSS

It had been a long season and a lonesome one, and now it was just midwinter when it got dark very early. Dorothy had often no employment but a sort of dreaming journeying. She wandered slowly upstairs and down, through the bare halls and the dusty, crannied places under stairs. She watched the snow whirl silently around the corners of the house and went into the kitchen to breathe on the windows' frost-jungles, but the housekeeper didn't want her there. Then Father would come into the hall and stamp to get the snow off his boots, and she would slide away and go sit under the stairs. There she would make up a long, elaborate daydream: that her dead mother had left something hidden somewhere around the house for Dorothy to find. It could take days and days of just looking and turning over clothes in her dead mother's

closet, but of course she would recognize it instantly when she found it. Her cough kept her from going to school or seeing much of anyone. She would sit under the stairs and think a lot, and then, when it got dark and the five o'clock chimes rang from the bedroom clock, Dorothy would go down to supper.

He looked across the dinner table at his daughter, her round rimless glasses perched seriously on her nose. Her pigtailed stuck out at an angle from her head. She had put red rubber bands around them as if she didn't care what she looked like.

"How was everything this afternoon, Dorothy?" he said. She stopped eating buttered carrots.

"Fine," she said. Her glasses slipped down and rested on her nose.

"Push up your glasses, hon," he said. She pushed them up with one buttery finger and watched him.

"Next week I'll be coming home a half hour early every day," he said. "Won't that be nice? We'll see each other a lot sooner."

She stared at him over the rims of her glasses. They magnified the lower half of her eyes and not the upper. She looked like a goldfish, somehow.

"Mm," she said. She took another mouthful of buttered carrots and chewed them slowly. After dinner he read to her and later, at her bedtime, asked the housekeeper how she'd been all day and what she'd been doing. He insisted on tucking her in himself when she went to bed.

Dorothy woke up in the middle of the night and listened to tell if anyone was awake. She knew it must be the middle of the night. It was dark and the house had become a great windy cavern that whispered and creaked and magnified the scurry of mice in the walls into thunder. Dim light leaked in under the window curtains. Dorothy sat up in bed, holding the blankets around her. She stuck her feet out of bed. Then she stood on the cold boards with her braids piercing the dark and her nightdress stirring faintly around her bare feet. She padded across the floor and pulled aside the curtains.

It was almost light outside because of the snow; the sky was only a mass of falling, drifting flakes that passed inches in front of her eyes.

On tiptoe, barefoot, with her nightdress blowing as she climbed the windy stair, she crept up to the second floor. She passed her father's bedroom on the way, very quietly. There was the hall radiator—she ran her hand over it; it was so cold that the freezing iron burned like fire.

On the third floor there were full-length windows that opened out onto the courtyard. Dorothy leaned against them for a few minutes, staring out at the falling snow.

In her dream she put a hand to the mutely lit glass, and the window opened with a rush of air. The wind gathered around her; it whirled, lifted her, and dropped her slowly miles and miles through the falling snow. Snowflakes fell on her and lay unmelted. She liked that. She began to run. She skimmed swiftly over a long white country road, past windy hills, between the huge muted monoliths of the forest trees, past quiet avenues of hedges, through fields muffled in white, past tilted, half-buried cottages. There was a park she had once visited, with outdoor picnic tables spread in white, and circles of trees, each still branch ridged with snow.

She smiled and let the pale folds of her nightgown drift around her feet, immensely pleased, her feet scarcely touched the blanched earth.

They were there.

One was thin, as hollow as a mask behind, of cold and cordial silver. A silver bow and long arrows lay over his arm.

You are a Hunter, she said, her voice deliciously quiet in the spreading quietness. Aren't you? He nodded. The two others were not as great. The taller one was a traveler with a clown's nose and peaked hat. His face was foolish and sad. The third was a gnome, chunky and thick, hardly anybody.

You seem to be a Clown, she said wisely to the one. And you — to the other — are very Little, although I don't know your name. Is there anything else?

The Clown spoke and his voice was absurdly high, thin, and sad. It was also silent.

We are adventurers, he said proudly. The Hunter smiled, although without a face and lips to smile.

Yes, yes, added Little. We go to dethrone a tyrant who lives on a mountain. He holds a Princess captive in his castle.

The Hunter smiled and lightly touched his bow.

May I come? Dorothy asked. The Hunter extended one hand. It

touched hers and its cold burned like fire.

We have been waiting for no one but you, he said, and his voice echoed light and hollow in the clearing. Dorothy unbraided her hair and let it fall loose. It grew long and hung to her waist. She turned and saw her father working his way laboriously toward them. He wore arctic furs and goggles and sank in snow up to his knees.

Don't vanish into silences, Dorothy! he cried. Come home, come home, come home.

She threw a handful of snow at him and he dissolved into snowflakes, gurgling:

You'll catch your death.

They rose and glided North under the heavy gray sky. Dorothy's breath made a frosty cloud around her. It was as warm as a coat. The snow was warmer, like cream, like white Persian kittens, like white fur, like love.

He looked across the dinner table at his daughter, who was seriously drinking her dinner milk.

"I guess your cough is better," he said. "Isn't it? I guess soon the doctor will let you go back to school. Won't that be nice?"

"Yes, daddy," she said.

"Well, winter doesn't last forever," he said. "Does it?"

"No, daddy," she said. She put down her milk, leaving a large

white mustache over her upper lip. "Daddy," she said, "when I go back I won't know anything. I'll be behind."

"My daughter behind?" he said. "Don't you worry about that. You're smart, you'll make it up in a couple of weeks."

She nodded politely and finished the last drop of milk.

Once the Clown picked a flower. It was all white: petals, leaves, and stem, an odorless rose. He stuck it in his pointed hat, and all the travelers sang a song they had made up:

Our hearts fill
With good-will,
Four strong,
Marching along,
Singing this song.

The rose sang with them in a shrill voice, only singing "five" where they sang "four" because it seemed to think it was one of them. After a while the Clown dropped it out of his hat onto the snow, where it stopped singing and crumbled into a heap of snowflakes.

It died, said Dorothy. The Hunter shook his head.

It was never real, he said. But it didn't know that.

In the hushed white forest where the sky dropped slowly and perpetually, it was never day or night, only a muted gray, half like twilight and not at all like dawn.

Little asked Dorothy: Are you hungry? She thought and shook her head.

But she should be, the Clown protested, holding his own head anxiously to one side. The Hunter brushed a strand of hair away from Dorothy's face with one flat silver finger.

Not now.

After days the trees began to thin and dwindle, and soon they came upon an open plain where the sky arched like lead. This was a terrible place. Dorothy and the Hunter were not afraid, but the Clown and Little hung back and hugged one another — not, as they carefully pointed out, for fear — only for warmth to keep out the chill of fear.

The castle is up ahead! they whispered.

The Hunter strode lightly ahead, carrying his bow and arrows, and Dorothy walked in the downy brushings his feet left in the snow. She made angels and roses of them. The Clown and Little began to wail — not, as they quickly pointed out, for fear — only for noise to keep out the silence of fear.

At first the ground began to slope; then they were in hills; then the hills grew; there were palisades, cliffs, escarpments, rocks black as night, nights rocky as ravines, paths that could lose you forever, boulders that could come rattling

down. On a monstrous rampart that humped itself nakedly in massive ribs and shoulders, at the highest point, over an immense abyss, was the Tyrant's castle. It hung half over a sheer drop. It gleamed blackly, turreted in midnight basalt. An obsidian-colored flag flew stiffly over it, stretched to tautness by the toothy winds of the mountaintop.

Here is the place, the Hunter said, his queer, chiming voice echoing even in the mountain pass. The Clown straightened his hat and smiled gently at Dorothy. I must look my best when going into danger, he said. A shrill wind hit them, lifting Dorothy's long hair over her head like a flag. They began to climb.

Her father found her leaning out of an upstairs window in a cotton dress, letting the cold wind blow around her. She was trying to keep a snowflake unmelted on her finger. He didn't scold her, but sent her to bed and sent the housekeeper up to take care of her. She lay in bed with her hands clasped across her chest, politely refusing to read anything. She said she was perfectly all right. She lay there all day. And thought and thought and thought and thought.

The door to the castle was brass; it swung open into a long

hall when Dorothy pushed it with all her strength. They followed the hall until it opened up into a great, echoing room, hung with tapestries that depicted the four seasons, and haying, and mowing, and other mythological scenes. At the very end of the room, on a throne of flint, sat the Tyrant, his head sunk in sleep. He was huge and wavering and mist-gray; Dorothy could see through him to the wall behind. A circle of steel went round his head; it was his crown. Quickly Little ran to a trumpet hanging on the wall and blew three notes. The Tyrant started out of sleep, and as he rose, as he woke, his face became terrible with rage.

Push up your glasses, Dorothy! he roared. The Hunter drew back the invisible string of his bow and broke the steel circle with a frosty arrow. The Tyrant sank to the floor and spread in a puddle of tears.

Hurrah! cried the Clown. We have killed the Tyrant.

Hurrah! cried Little. I blew the horn that woke up the Tyrant.

Hurrah! cried Dorothy. I pushed open the door that let us into the castle of the Tyrant.

The Hunter leaned against a wall and said: Look. The Princess is coming.

The Princess blew down a corridor and into the room. She was all of fog. There was less of her than there had been of the Tyrant.

Thank you for saving me, she said in a damp, rushing voice like water falling under stone arches. I am very grateful to you.

The Clown dropped to one knee. The pleasure is all ours, lovely lady, he said. She patted him on the head, and a little cloud from her hand caught on his hat and trailed from it like a breath.

They walked out of the castle. At once the fierce, grinning wind lifted the Princess and whirled her away in ragged, torn streamers.

What a shame, said Dorothy. Little nodded.

She was beautiful, declared the Clown sadly. I never saw anyone so beautiful before. Two tears rolled down his cheeks.

They walked easily down the shrunken mountain, and the castle, although not very far behind them, became a toy no bigger than Dorothy's hand. Then it disappeared. Snow began to fall; pearly covered trees and bushes rose silently around them. The light paled to a moonstone gray.

Look! cried Dorothy: Oh, look at that! and her voice seemed to seep away and lose itself in silences. There was a lake ahead, set like an opal between the fringed, drooping trees. Dorothy ran, she skated, she dipped and spun over the cloudy ice, whirling in tighter and tighter circles until she dropped on her knees, and bowed and bowed while

Little and the Clown applauded frantically. Then, kneeling, praised, safe, adventurous, she saw through the trees a faint light, a touch of color, the very smallest kind of change.

There was a light in the East.

The dawn! cried the Clown. No, the spring! cried Little.

The spring, the spring! they sang, whirling about, holding hands and dancing in a ring. The spring, the spring, the spring's a thing when birds all sing and ice goes ching! and bushes fling and vase is Ming and flowers ping and hearts go zing and love's on the wing and life is king!

Dorothy, on her knees on the ice, said, No, no! It isn't going to come. I won't let it. But they danced on.

You can't stop it, they cried. The spring, the spring, the flowery spring! The glint, the chime, the sky, the blue, the joy, the jay, the jam, the ruel

And after that comes summer, you know, they added.

Dorothy began to cry, there on the pond. The Hunter knelt down and put one arm around her. Its touch burned like fire. He said, in his no-voice, his voice that was all the voices she had ever loved: You don't have to.

Then they were all gone and she was standing barefoot in her night-gown in the courtyard of her home.

The sun had risen in the East into a clear sky: the long spell of winter was broken. A face appeared at a second-story window. Come in here! it called crossly. You'll catch your death of cold. Quickly Dorothy ran upstairs to her room. She climbed into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin.

"Yes, daddy, yes, daddy!" she called. "I'm in bed now."

But she knew her mother's secret. She had found it.

The next day Dorothy was very ill, the day after that she did not wake up very much, and the day after that she died. At her funeral there were bunches of violets, banked azaleas, and lots of hothouse gladioli. It was like summer. Everyone said so. Dozens of people came to see Dorothy in her Sunday dress and many women wept.

In a pale forest, under still, white branches and a slowly dropping sky, Dorothy plucks a white rose for the faceless silver Huntsman. There's no place to put the flower but in his hands, for he's as hollow as a mask. Her long hair is knotted beautifully about one of his long arrows. Another pierces her heart. She smiles a little, rueful perhaps, happy perhaps.

I kept away the spring, she says to him. Didn't I? I really did it.

I kept away the spring.

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THE STARCROSSED

by Ben Bova

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"It goes this way, stupid!"

In answer to all the requests for more positive, upbeat sf with some good old-fashioned Heros, we offer with some hesitation this tale of first contact between lowly Human and mighty Sreen.

Upstart

by STEVEN UTLEY

"You must obey the edict of the Sreen," the Intermediaries have told us repeatedly, "there is no appeal," but the captain won't hear of it, not for a moment. He draws himself up to his full height of two meters and looms threateningly over the four or five Intermediaries, who are, after all, small and not particularly substantial-looking beings, mere wisps of translucent flesh through which their bluish skeletal structures and pulsing organs can be seen.

"You take us in to talk to the Sreen," the captain tells them, "you take us in right *now*, do you hear me?" His voice is like a sword coming out of its scabbard, an angry, menacing, deadly metal-on-metal rasp. "You take us to these God-damned Sreen of yours and let us talk to them."

The Intermediaries shrink before him, fluttering their pallid appendages in obvious dismay, and

bleat in unison, "No, no, what you request is impossible. The decision of the Sreen is final, and, anyway, they're very busy right now, they can't be bothered."

The captain wheels savagely, face mottled, teeth bared, arms windmilling with rage. I have never seen him this furious before, and it frightens me. Not that I cannot appreciate and even share his anger toward the Sreen, of course. The Sreen have been very arbitrary and high-handed from the start, snatching our vessel out of normal space, scooping it up and stuffing it into the maw of their own craft, establishing communication with us through their Intermediaries, then issuing their incredible edict. They do not appear to care that they have interfered with Humankind's grandest endeavor. Our vessel is Terra's first bona fide starship, in which the captain and I were to have accelerated through normal

space to light-velocity, activated the tardyon-tachyon conversion system and popped back into normal space in the neighborhood of Alpha Centauri. I can understand how the captain feels.

At the same time, I'm afraid that his rage will get us into extremely serious trouble. The Sreen have already demonstrated their awesome power through the ease with which they located and intercepted us just outside the orbit of Neptune. Their vessel is incomprehensible, a drupelet-cluster of a construct which seems to move in casual defiance of every law of physics, half in normal space, half in elsewhere-space. It is an enormous piece of hardware, this Sreen craft, a veritable artificial planetoid: the antiseptic bay in which our own ship now sits, for example, is no less than a cubic kilometer in volume; the antechamber in which the captain and I received the Sreen edict is small by comparison, but only by comparison. Before us is a great door of dully gleaming gray metal, five or six meters high, approximately four wide. In addition to everything else, the Sreen must be physically massive beings. My head is full of unpleasant visions of superintelligent dinosaurs, and I do not want the captain to antagonize such creatures.

"Sir," I say, "there's nothing we

can do here. We're just going to have to return home and let Earth figure a way out of this thing. Let them handle it." Absurd, absurd, I know how absurd the suggestion is even as I voice it, no one on Earth is going to be able to defy the edict. "We haven't any choice, sir, they want us to go now, and I think we'd better do it."

The captain glares at me and balls his meaty hands into fists. I tense in expectation of blows which do not fall. Instead, he shakes his head emphatically and turns to the Intermediaries. "This is ridiculous. Thoroughly ridiculous."

"Captain —"

He silences me with an imperious gesture. "Who do these Sreen think they *are*?"

"The true and indisputable masters of the universe," the Intermediaries pipe in one high but full-toned voice, "the lords of Creation."

"I want to see them," the captain insists.

"You must return to your ship," they insist, "and obey the will of the Sreen."

"Like hell! Like bloody God-damned hell! Where are they? What makes them think they have the right, the *right*, to claim the whole damned *universe* for themselves?" The captain's voice is going up the scale, becoming a shriek, and filled though I am with

terror of the Sreen, I am also caught up in fierce admiration for my superior officer. He may be a suicidal fool to refuse to accept the situation, but there is passion in his foolishness, and it is an infectious passion. "How *dare* they treat us this way? What do they *mean*, ordering us to go home and stay there because *they* own the universe?"

He takes a step toward the door. The Intermediaries move to block his path. With an inarticulate screech, he ploughs through them, swatting them aside with the backs of his hands, kicking them out of his way with his heavy-booted feet. The Intermediaries break easily, and it occurs to me then that they are probably as disposable a commodity among the Sreen as tissue paper is among human beings. One Intermediary is left limping along after the captain. Through the clear

pale skin of its back I see that some vertebrae have been badly dislocated. The thing nevertheless succeeds in overtaking the captain and wrapping its appendages around his calf, bleating all the while, "No, no, you must abide by the edict, even as every other inferior species has, you must abide ..." The captain is having trouble disentangling himself, and so I go to him. Together, we tear the Intermediary loose. The captain flings it aside, and it bounces off the great portal, spins across the polished floor, lies crushed and unmoving.

Side by side, we pause directly before the door. My teeth, I suddenly realize, are chattering with fear. "Captain," I say as my resolve begins to disintegrate, "why are we doing this?"

"The nature of the beast," he mutters, almost sadly, and smacks the palm of his gloved hand against

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the portal. "Sreen!" he yells. "Come out, Sreen!"

And we wait.

"If we don't make it home from this," I say at length, "if they never hear from us back on Earth, never know what became of their star-ship —"

"They'll just keep tossing men and women at the stars until someone does come back. Sreen or no Sreen." The captain strikes the door again, with the edge of his fist this time. "Sreen!" A bellow which, curiously, does not echo in the vast antechamber. "Sreen! SREEN!"

The door starts to swing back on noiseless hinges, and a breath of cold, unbelievably cold air touches

our faces. The door swings open. The door swings open. The door swings open forever before we finally see into the next chamber.

"Oh my God," I whisper to the captain, "oh, oh my God."

They are titans, they are the true and indisputable masters of the universe, the lords of Creation, and they are unhappy with us. They speak, and theirs is a voice that shatters mountains. "WHO. ARE. YOU?"

The captain's lips draw back over his teeth in a mirthless grin as he plants his fists on his hips, throws back his head, thrusts out his jaw. "Who wants to know?"

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Following the Dust-Up, several kinds of mutants had appeared among the human race, and from one special group of mutants grew a new spectator sport, a terrifying battle of visions ...

Dream Fighter

by BOB SHAW

Rowan and his wife had to carry their own cases up three flights of stairs and along a sad brown corridor. Some of the lighting fixtures were broken, and the others served only to create dirty orange smudges on the walls. Jane stopped outside the room the desk clerk had assigned them and looked about her with a mixture of disdain and weariness.

"Some hotel," she said. "Why do you allow Sammy to book us in to places like this?"

"It's only for one night," Rowan told her.

"It's always only for one night. I can't go on like this much longer, Victor."

"We'll be taking a break soon."

"I don't see how. The money you get for one fight these days barely sees us through to the next."

"It's better than no money, which is what we'd have if I...." The weight of the cases in Rowan's

hands suddenly became unbearable. "Do you mind if we continue the conversation inside? If we're paying for the room, we might as well make use of it."

Jane nodded, turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open. Just beyond it, in the shabby dimness of the room, stood a grinning, scaly horror — part man, part dragon — which raised a clawed hand in menace. Jane drew breath sharply, but stood her ground.

"Victor," she said. "Victor!"

"I'm sorry," Rowan mumbled. He closed his mind, painfully, and the creature vanished into nothingness.

"You're losing control." Jane strode forward, through the spot where the apparition had been, and slung her case onto a bed. "Isn't that a sign it's time to quit?"

"How in hell can I quit?" Rowan kicked the door shut behind him, dropped the cases, and lay

down on the other bed. The soft, walnut-sized bump on top of his head was throbbing, aching, flooding him with disquiet. He cupped his hand over it, feeling the unnatural warmth through his cropped hair, and tried to relax.

"Victor, you're in no condition to fight." Jane spoke softly as she knelt beside him. Grateful for the warmth in her voice, Rowan turned to his wife. The years had honed the original prettiness of her face into taut economical planes which Rowan saw as beauty.

"I'll be all right," he said. "If I beat Grumman tonight, the purse will be enough to let us..." He stopped speaking as Jane began to shake her head.

"Victor, you've lost twelve fights in a row. Against third-raters. And Grumman's supposed to be good."

"Perhaps he's not all that good."

"He's too good for you." There was no malice or reproach in Jane's words. "Five years ago it would have been different, but now... I mean, I can't understand how Sammy even got you the fight."

"You know who to put your money on, then." Rowan was referring to his wife's small ritual bet, which lately had become a monetary sacrifice.

"Never," she said. "Now, you'd better get some rest."

Rowan closed his eyes and courted sleep, but his nerves were charged with awareness of the contest which was only a few hours away. There was an agitation, a restless traffic along all his neural pathways, and his exo-brain — that seat of supranormal power — seemed to crouch on top of his skull like a tiny animal with a disparate life of its own, scheming and dreaming....

The taxi in which Sammy Kling rode downtown had been old even before they had ripped out its gasoline engine and put in a battery-powered unit. He perched on the narrow rear seat, staring out at the shabby streets with eyes which had lost some of their usual glitter. *How come, he asked himself, that so many good cities got clobbered in the Dust-Up, while dumps like this survived?*

He was a flinty little man, normally immune to his surroundings, but he was in a mood of vulnerability brought on by the telephone call he had received some minutes earlier. It had lasted about twenty seconds, consisting of nothing more than a terse instruction from Tucks Raphael, Grumman's manager, to meet him at his hotel. Raphael had hung up without waiting for Kling's assent.

The fact that he could be treated in such a manner, Kling

realized, was an indication of how far he had sunk in the world. There was a time when he had owned pieces of four good fighters, but one had died and two had burned up. The one who remained, Vic Rowan, was fading fast and should have been put out to pasture years earlier. Kling had, of course, brought on other men, but his judgment was not what it used to be — or the game was changing — and none of them had amounted to anything. Now he was paying the penalty for being a loser — living in cheap hotels, eating synthetic pap, having to go running when men like Tucks Raphael crooked their fingers.

When the taxi dropped him at the Sheraton, he paid, without any argument, the exorbitant sum demanded by the driver and went inside. Raphael's suite was only on the fourth floor, but Kling — too dispirited to walk — paid the elevator surcharge and rode up. Two hard-looking men showed him into the well-lit silvery room where Raphael was lounging in a deep chair and making a telephone call. Raphael had grown fatter and shinier in the years since Kling had last seen him, but Kling's attention was absorbed by the younger man who was standing at a window. Built more like an old-style boxer than a dream fighter, Ferdy Grumman had pale grey eyes fringed with white lashes. In contrast to the

powerful musculature of his body, his mouth was small and womanly, pursed in permanent distaste. His scalp was shaved to reveal the irregular blister of exo-brain centered on top of his skull.

Kling stared at him for a moment, then — as their eyes met — he felt an icy sensation of dread, a fierce projection of hatred, and he knew at once that Grumman was a borderline psycho, a man whose main reason for fighting was that monsters were devouring his soul. He quickly averted his gaze and saw Grumman's pink lips twitch in satisfaction.

Poor Rowan, Kling thought. Poor, gentle, faded-out Rowan hasn't a chance. Tonight could finish him.

The thought inspired in Kling a rare flash of guilt about his profession. Several different kinds of mutant had appeared in the human race in the years following the Dust-Up, all of them characterized by the extrusion of extra cortical tissue through the fontanel. There were the straightforward telepaths — many of whom had been killed before the UN had extended special protection — and there were the seers, and those with limited powers of telekinesis. Their abilities had proved useful to society in one way or another, and they had found profitable roles, but there had also been a sprinkling of Unclassified

bles, including those individuals whose "gift" it was to make others see things which did not exist.

They functioned partly by instinctive control of radiation fields around them — the images they created could be photographed — but there was also an element of telepathy, because the visions were much more realistic and more detailed to the naked eye than to the camera. In a tired and shabby world the opportunity for a new kind of spectator sport had been seized at once, and the trade of dream fighter had come into existence. There were countries where the sport was illegal because of the psychological wear and tear on the combatants, and — in the dreadful presence of Grumman — Kling understood the reasoning....

"Hello, Sammy," Raphael said, setting the telephone down. "How you been?"

"Okay, Tucks. I'm getting along okay."

Raphael smiled disbelievingly. "Have you met my boy Ferdy?"

"No. Hello." Kling nodded towards Grumman and looked away again, unwilling to face the eyes. Grumman did not acknowledge the greeting in any way.

Raphael's smile broadened. "My Ferdy is going to be the next area champion, and I'm making him contender before the end of the year."

"That's fast," Kling commented, knowing it was expected of him.

"You bet it's fast. That's why he's got to get in ten straight wins in the next five weeks. That's my program for him, and I'm not taking no chances with it. No chances at all."

Kling nodded. "Why did you want to see me?"

"It's like this. Ferdy will destroy Vic Rowan tonight, but because this is a big operation with a lot of heavy money involved, I'm handing you two K. For insurance, if you know what I mean."

Kling fought to control the pounding in his chest. "You want Vic to throw the fight?"

"He won't be throwing it," Raphael explained with mock-patience. "I'm generous. I'm giving you and Rowan a thousand each just to accept defeat gracefully."

"It's a waste of money," Grumman said in a sullen monotone. "I'm going to turn Rowan's brain into mush and let it run out of his eyes."

Raphael waved him to silence. "What do you say, Sammy?"

Kling's brain was analyzing the situation with cryogenic efficiency. Rowan was going to lose, anyway. The last shreds of his reputation were going, and it was becoming difficult to match him. He was so certain to lose that there was no

need even to tell about the fix. And with two thousand monits in his pocket he, Sammy Kling, could quit the fight game and go into something which offered better returns and more security. The decision was easy to make.

"You've got yourself a deal, Tucks," he said. "The figure was two K?"

"It's all there." Raphael took a long envelope from an inner pocket of his jacket and handed it to Kling.

"Thanks, Tucks." Kling turned to leave and was almost at the door when Raphael called him.

"Sammy! Vic Rowan used to be good, didn't he?"

"People say that."

"Just remember," Raphael said. "You and Rowan have taken my money. I've bought you. And if there's any funny business tonight, I'll put you both through the meat grinder. Got it?"

Kling nodded silently and hurried out of the room.

Rowan brushed his hair, trying not to touch the now-burning lump, and turned to his wife. "Are you coming to the fight?"

"To help carry you out afterwards?" Jane exhaled a cloud of cigarette smoke. "No, thanks."

"I've only been carried out once."

"It doesn't matter. Besides, I've

heard how Grumman fights and I don't want to see it." She continued flicking the pages of a magazine with studied disinterest. Jane was always tense and withdrawn just before a fight, but this time something in her manner alarmed Rowan.

"You'll be here when I get back, won't you?"

"I've nowhere else to go, Victor."

"I..." Rowan gave up the struggle to find the right words. He closed the door and went down the three flights of stairs to where Sammy Kling was waiting with a taxi. The little man looked perfectly normal but a vague signal from his exo-brain suggested to Rowan that Kling had things on his mind.

"All right, Sammy?" he said as he got into the waiting vehicle.

"I'm all right," Kling replied gloomily. "A bit worried about you, though."

"Why?"

"I don't like some of the things I hear about Grumman. Listen, Vic, when you feel him getting the edge on you — don't wreck yourself trying to stop him. Just bow out, huh?"

Rowan felt a stab of annoyance. "Why is everybody so worked up about Ferdy Grumman?"

"I don't think you should risk getting your brains scrambled, that's all," Kling muttered. "It's up

to you, of course."

"I know it is." Rowan sat without speaking for the rest of the short journey to the stadium. He knew he was going to lose again, that he no longer had the vital drive to win, but some remnant of his former self resented being written off so casually. The perverse notion crossed his mind that it would be worth beating Grumman for nothing more than the pleasure of seeing Jane's face when she heard the news.

At the amber-lit stadium he got the checking-in formalities over with as quickly as possible, and was glad to reach the solitude of a preparation room. It was an important part of the system that dream fighters did not meet prior to a bout, especially in the final minutes when antagonism was high and control of their powers most likely to slip. He lay on the simple bed and half heard, half felt the occasional eruptions of cheering from the crowd in the arena above. Grumman and he were fourth on the bill, a good position, and the audience would be receptive when they went on. Lying perfectly still, scarcely breathing, Rowan made himself ready for the struggle ahead.

When the signal came — a double chime from the loudspeaker on the wall — he rose without haste and went along the corridor to the ramp which ascended to the arena.

A strongly built man he recognized as Grumman emerged from another corridor and reached the foot of the ramp at the same time. Rowan was instantly aware of his opponent's chilling psychic aura, but he went through it, like a swimmer breasting an icy tide, and held out his hand.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said.

Grumman looked down at the outstretched hand and conjured a piece of brown, smoking filth into it. The image was too close to Rowan's sphere of influence to last for more than a fraction of a second before he blanked it out of existence, but the accompanying mental shockwave had the force of a physical blow. Face unchanged, pale eyes staring, Grumman walked on up the ramp. Rowan followed him, barely aware of the reverberating announcements which boomed across the amphitheater, cursing himself for having given Grumman the opportunity to take the psychological advantage.

At the head of the ramp, one on each side, were two low circular bases. Grumman went to the one on the left. Rowan turned right and was still a couple of paces from his base when there was an abrupt silence, followed by the sound of a woman screaming. He spun and found himself facing a thirty-foot-high demon.

A red light began flashing in the judges' kiosk, to indicate that Grumman had made a foul play by leading off before the signal. Rowan's senses were swamped by the reality of the beast towering over him. He had seen many monsters during his career, beings designed to inspire fear and thus weakness, but this one was in a class of its own. Its face was a compound of things human and things animal, and of things the earth had never seen. Its body was grotesquely deformed, yet true to alien symmetries — black, powerful, matted with hair in some places, glistening naked in others. And above all, the demon was obscene, massively sexual, with an overpowering realization of detail which had the intended effect of cowing the beholder's mind. Rowan was closest to the apparition, and he took the full projected force of it.

He moved backwards, instinctively, and felt his way on to his base, filled with an intense reluctance to go on with the fight. It would mean entering a strange intimacy with the demon's creator, and that was something which should not be asked of him. He considered quitting in that first moment, by stepping down from the base, then came the understanding that he was reacting exactly as his opponent intended, which was something a dream

fighter should never do. That was what such contests were basically all about — the forces of nightmare, the conquering of minds by the use of no weapon but fear itself.

Habits developed over many years caused him to probe at the towering demon with intangible sensors, and he found the image *hard*. That meant Grumman was playing a, one-shot, concentrating all his powers into a single protagonist with which he intended to win the contest. The discovery surprised Rowan, because it hinted at a lack of flexibility which was dangerous for any fighter trying to make the big time. He gathered his strength, opened the shutters of his mind, and put up a scaly, slope-shouldered dinosaur, equal in height to the demon but many times greater in apparent mass. There was a gasp of appreciation from the encircling terraces.

Rowan caused the dinosaur to lunge forward, but the black demon — moving with incredible speed — swung a razored hand at its throat. And connected. The movement was carried out so naturally, with such a co-ordinated and perfect simulation of reality, that Rowan was momentarily convinced, and — in being convinced — yielded control of his own image. There was a huge fountaining of dark blood, and the dinosaur fell sideways, its head almost torn off.

Rowan automatically dissolved the writhing creature into nothingness, while he fought to regain control of his own terror. Caught unawares, he had still been involved with the dinosaur when it was killed, and now a part of his subconscious knew what it was like to be ripped asunder by organic knives. Unbidden, in spite of all his efforts to prevent it, a lethal fear began to seep through him.

The demon knotted arms above its head in silent triumph, and a seemingly tiny Grumman performed the same gestures, like a puppet gyrating at the feet of its master.

Rowan forced himself to rally. His exo-brain was on fire, pulsing with agony, but he took command of it, and — perhaps reacting against the demon's associations with evil — put up a giant knight in full medieval armor. The warrior was equipped with a two-handed sword which he swung against the demon in a glittering sweep, but the blow never landed. The demon was too fast, too ferocious. Again Rowan was convinced, and again he yielded control. The bright armor was slashed open like foil, the blood spurted, and another part of Rowan died.

After that he tried a two-headed python which was torn apart even as it materialized around the demon's neck. And a bat-winged

creature which Grumman's demon dismembered with contemptuous ease.

Each time, Rowan was unable to disengage quickly enough, and the resulting neural punishment brought him to his knees. His exo-brain was a blob of white-hot metal searing through his skull. He clasped the top of his head with both hands and rocked backwards and forwards, peering through slitted eyes. The crowd, sensing that the crisis point had been reached, ceased to make any sound.

It's time to step down, Rowan told himself. *You don't have to die again. Just step down off the base, and it will all be over, and you can have a rest.* His involuntary swaying movements grew more violent as his body, unconcerned with matters of pride or prestige, fought against the dictates of his intellect.

"Go ahead, old man — fall over." Grumman's gloating whisper reached him across stellar distances. "This is the time to do it. Just fall over."

Rowan stared at him uncomprehendingly. Everybody expected him to do the same thing. Jane. Sammy. Grumman. They all wanted him to fall over. In a way it seemed a good idea not to fight any longer, and yet....

Rowan brought his eyes to a focus on the opposite base and made an astonishing discovery.

Grumman was concentrating his attention on Rowan, indulging a personal enmity, instead of monitoring the image which loomed above him. Rowan glanced upwards and saw that the edges of the huge demon had softened slightly, that some of the oppressive detail had been allowed to blur. He waited for a full second while, from the depths of his memory, he summoned up an old friend — one who had settled many issues for him in the past.

Valerius was a professional soldier, a scarred and weather-beaten veteran who had served with three different legions in Syria, Gaul and Britain. He had withstood rain, snow and desert heat with equal stoicism, and he had slain the varied enemies of Rome with impartial efficiency, regardless of whether they wore silks or skins, regardless of which gods those enemies believed to be giving them protection. He was a stolid, unimaginative man — as plain, functional and uncompromising as the short sword he carried — and in all his years of service he had never encountered a creature which could survive having an iron blade driven through its guts. And, as Valerius saw things, this meant that no such creature existed.

Rowan — knowing by heart every detail, every rivet and thong of the legionary's equipment and

armor — snapped him into existence in microseconds. He was much smaller than the demon, a sign that Rowan's strength was nearly spent, but his sword was sharp, and he struck with economical swiftness. The blade went deep into the demon's protruding belly, and puslike fluids gouted. Rowan heard Grumman grunt with pain and surprise, and he guessed at once that the younger man had never experienced neuro-shock before.

This is what it's like, he thought savagely, directing onto the demon a flurry of hacking blows which transmitted their fury to its creator, convulsing him with sympathetic shock. Grumman turned his eyes upward, guiding the black demon as it made a snapping rush, but Valerius — his body protected by a long Roman shield — struck at the face with almost clinical exactitude.

Grumman whimpered and fell backwards from his base. His demon vanished as he struck the floor.

The fight had ended.

In spite of his exhaustion, Rowan kept Valerius in existence long enough for him to acknowledge the cheers of the crowd with upraised sword, and then gradually dissolved him out. *They shouldn't have written us off*, he told the fading warrior. *They should never write a man off.*

It was late, and the stadium had emptied, before Rowan broke free of the local sports reporters. He had spent some time trying to find Sammy Kling and finally had had to go to the promoter's office alone and collect the winner's purse, a check for five hundred monits. Puzzled by Sammy's absence, Rowan waited on the front steps of the building for a few minutes, nodding as the box-office staff bade him good night and the stadium was sectionally plunged into blackness. He debated calling a taxi, then decided that walking back to the hotel would ease the dull pounding in his head. The after-taste of victory was less pleasant than it had seemed in memory.

He lit a cigarette and walked north on a shadowed street.

The car drew in beside him with feline swiftness, its sleek haunches speckled with rain, and four men got out of it. They closed on Rowan without speaking. Sensing their purpose, he ducked his head and tried to run, but two of them hit him at the same time, with what felt like mailed fists, and he went down. Within seconds he had been dragged into an alley, and there followed a nightmarish period during which he was systematically kicked from neck to groin. Eventually the blood-red explosions of pain seemed to diminish, and he realized, with gratitude, that he was

escaping into unconsciousness.

"That's enough," a voice said from somewhere above him. "He's got to know what's happening."

The assault on his body ceased, and the dim figures re-deployed. In the faint light from the street one of them appeared to be holding an ordinary garden spade. Rowan became aware of an even greater threat than that of simply being bludgeoned, and he tried to fight against it.

"Hold his head steady." The dark figure moved over him, foreshortening like Grumman's demon, and his head was clamped in place on the wet concrete.

"No," Rowan pleaded. "No!"

"Yes, Rowan," the voice told him. "And don't say you weren't warned."

The spade drove downwards across his skull, shearing through skin and extraneous brain tissue alike. And, in that ultimate pang of agony, Rowan was born into the world of normal men.

Perhaps two hours elapsed before he found the strength to get to his feet and resume walking back to the hotel. The streets seemed unusually quiet, but he was able to decide if the impression was a genuine one or something subjective, stemming from the newly found silence within his head. Occasional cars ghosted by without stopping,

their occupants undisturbed by the sight of a drunk staggering home-wards with a bloodied handkerchief pressed to his scalp.

The hotel lobby was deserted, enabling him to climb the three flights of stairs without being seen. When he fumbled open the room door, there was darkness beyond, but the tiny beacon of a cigarette near the window signaled that Jane was awake and waiting for him.

"Where have you been, Victor?" she said quietly. "What happened to you?"

The concern in his wife's voice reminded Rowan that she had her own kind of dreams, better dreams than those which had just ceased to dominate his own life.

"What do you want first," he said, forcing his body to remain upright for the necessary moment, "the bad news, or the good news?"

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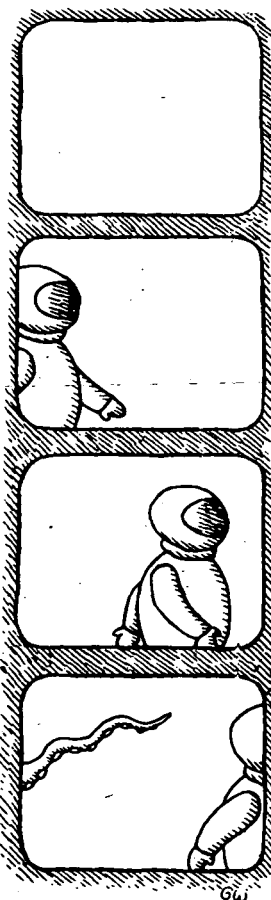
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FILLET OF SOLARIS

Not often in this column does the matter of the literary antecedents of movies come up, just because it is a rarity for a film to be made from a *genre* novel (or short story or whatever). This is just as well; as I've stated before, the two media are very different things, to be judged in very different ways. One of the problems that many s/f readers have with the medium of cinema is that their sphere of esthetics is entirely literary. A more general problem is that once one has read a book, a film seldom can replace the strong mind's-eye view that a really impressive writer has generated.

That is one reason I try *not* to read books that I know a film is to be made of; I like to be able to judge the work, i.e. the film, entirely on its own merits. So that is one reason I have not read Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*. (That movie's existence has been common knowledge for at least 4 or 5 years.) That is *one* reason; the other is that I have found the middle European science fiction writers are epitomally of a subgenre of science fiction that I generally dislike — didactic, Meaningful-with-a-capital-M, and heavily allegorical. To inject a personal opinion, I barely consider that sort

BAIRD SEARLES Films



of thing s/f at all, but usually the product of an author with a philosophical bent who is *using* s/f for his own purposes.

This, of course, is a point that could be argued for or against in a good deal more space than we have here. Moralistic s/f has a long history back through Swift, those heavy 19th century novels where someone goes to another planet or the future to find a Utopic or culturally satirical situation, and right up to *Planet of the Apes*.

Curiously enough, there is a line in *Solaris* that captures this dichotomy and pinpoints where this film is at: "We don't want other worlds; we want a mirror."

(Well, Searles, it's about bloody time you got to the movie. Why don't you practice what you preach and stop preaching?)

Sorry, but there's a couple of points I've got to make before I can tackle the movie directly. Another issue which has come up seldom if ever in the column is the matter of foreign language films. Particularly in a reviewing situation, I find them very hard to deal with. If they're dubbed, the voices almost never match, and the dialogue is strained to fit the actors' lip movements; while subtitles are inevitably false and stiff because spoken dialogue must be whittled down to fit the brief space available to the written titles.

(The movie, Searles! The movie!)

OK, I'm getting there. The Russian film of Lem's *Solaris* has been waiting for years for an American distributor. Tantalizing reports have come back from people who had seen it in England or Italy. One wonders what finally did it; a guess is that the last year's publicity about science fiction in general and s/f films in particular might have been responsible. There is also the fact that a few weeks before *Solaris* opened in New York, the *New York Times Book Review* ran a front page piece on Lem (infuriating that the high and mighty Times couldn't find an American s/f author to devote that much space to).

(I'm beginning to suspect you didn't even see it.)

I did too. Given 1) the film is subtitled 2) it seems to have been extensively and badly edited 3) I have not read the book, this is what it appears to be about:

The Russians have established a space station just a few miles above a planet named Solaris, which is entirely or mostly ocean. The station, which had had a crew of over eighty persons, is now nearly derelict — only two scientists remain. A psychologist comes from Earth (which is portrayed as contemporary in clothing, cars, architecture, etc.) to find that the ocean of Solaris may be sentient. It material-

izes beings from the minds of the humans and immediately creates a woman whom the psychologist had loved and who had killed herself some years before.

He sends her off in a rocket, but she is rematerialized and he falls in love with her again. She gradually gains self awareness and an identity. Because of her, he will not leave the station and sends an encephalogram (their word) to the ocean. The girl disappears, leaving a mysterious note.

We see the psychologist back at his country home with his father. It is raining inside the house. As the camera pulls back for an aerial view, we see that the house is on an island in the ocean of Solaris.

Up to now I have tried to be as objective as possible, and I think I have fairly stated the disadvantages one is at when trying to comprehend *Solaris*.

But given all that, what I gleaned of *Solaris* inevitably leads

to the following conclusion: it is one of the most Godawful, pretentiously sentimental, dull, endless, silly movies I have ever seen. The dialogue is mostly portentous drivel about truth, Man, and love which leads nowhere, but which goes on forever. The effects are minimal — a well designed space station and a liquid vortex ocean are about the extent of them.

The concepts are laughable: the planet Solaris seems about as accessible to what appears to be a contemporary civilization as Bermuda and, as another example, during a gravity loss, only the hero, the girl, a book and a candelabrum float about — everything else stays nicely put.

I could go on, but what's the use? Some nitwits have compared *Solaris* to *2001: A Space Odyssey*. After thinking about that for some time, I literally don't know what to say. Words, for once, fail me.



Here is a new Willy Newbury story, in which the banker's local natural science museum turns into the scene of a terrifying supernatural adventure.

Tiki

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

The giant spider crab of the North Pacific, the largest living crustacean, is said to be a sluggish, harmless creature.

I first heard of Esau Drexel's giant crabs at a party at the Museum of Natural Science. As a faithful member, I had taken Denise to a meeting. We stand around among elephants, dinosaurs, and Eskimo artifacts and booze up. When the noise rises to where you have to scream to be heard, the lights are blinked to summon the members to dinner. Afterwards, we listen to somebody like the late Dr. Louis Leakey or the late Sir Julian Huxley, or perhaps see a movie on the life of the Bakhtiari tribesman or of the common flea. As one whose boyhood ambition was to be a naturalist-explorer, I get a great kick out of these events.

Before the movie began, Dr. Esther Farsace, the Curator of Invertebrates, announced a dona-

tion to finance a hall in the new wing. This would be the Drexel Hall of Crustaceans. Everybody clapped. Looking, with his dark, three-piece suit and white mustache, every bit the prosperous, conservative old banker, Esau Drexel rose and bowed.

Everybody thinks of bankers as rich. I am not, but Esau Drexel was. When not presiding over the Harrison Trust Company and a junior banker named W. Wilson Newbury, he was off in his yacht, recording the songs of the finback whale or counting the elephant seals of Antarctica. He had fitted out this ship as a marine laboratory. The Japanese emperor had been his guest on board, because of their interest in marine biology.

After the lecture, we congratulated Drexel on his gift. Denise said, "Whatever gave you the idea, Esau?"

"When I was up in Bering Sea

last summer," he said, "the dredge brought up one of those giant spider crabs. It struck me that this poor old museum had no proper place to put it. We have some fine collections of Arthropoda, but far too many to display in one hall. So, being a director of the museum but never having given it anything much, I thought it was time I did, while I was still around to see how the money was spent.

"Tell you what," he continued, "when the new wing is further along, I'll give you and your kids a guided tour of it!"

Denise wrinkled her nose. "Willy will bring the children. Me, I like the animals with fur and feathers better than those like great bugs."

"Just a mammalian prejudice," said Drexel. "Where will you find a more gorgeous creature than *Odonodactylus scyllarus*?"

"Zut!" she said. "I still prefer my crabs in a can, ready to eat."

Drexel turned to me. "Willy, are you playing golf Saturday? You don't mind a little snow on the greens, do you?" For all that he was twenty years older than I, he had the constitution of a polar bear.

During the next summer, Drexel was off on his ship, collecting rare isopods and other sea creatures with lots of jointed legs. When he got back, I saw him (outside of working hours, that is) at the first

fall members' meeting. We were drinking our cocktails in the Hall of Oceanic Anthropology, and Denise was reading the caption on the big statue of dark, mahoganylike wood.

"Tiki of Atea," she read. "Hiva Oa, Marquesas Islands. *Que veut dire* 'Tiki of Atea,' darling?"

"A tiki is a Polynesian statue or idol," I said. "*Indubitablement*, Atea is the god the statue is of." Since Denise is French, we run a bilingual menage.

This statue was one of the oldest exhibits in the museum. It had been there since the nineteenth century. When Christian missionaries in the South Seas were exhorting their converts to burn up all the relics of "idolatry," some enterprising scientist had salvaged this eidolon.

That must have been a job, for the statue is seven feet tall and massive. It is just as ugly as those stone images on Easter Island, of which it reminded one, although better proportioned. It was a highly stylized piece of folk art, squat and blocky, with a snarling, thick-lipped mouth and round bug eyes. I daresay it had seen plenty of human sacrifices in its day.

Esau Drexel barged up with martini in hand and wife in tow. "Willy!" he roared. "Remember my saying I'd give you a guided tour of my new hall? Well, how about next weekend?"

"I never see him by daylight any more," said Mrs. Drexel to Denise. "He spends all his weekends here, supervising. I wonder the museum people haven't gone on strike, to get him out of their hair."

I said I should be delighted to bring such of my children as I could catch. I can take my crustaceans or leave them, but an invitation from the big boss is a command performance.

Our girls begged off. Stephen said he would go if he could bring his friend Hank. I hesitated at this.

Stephen was a sweet, docile twelve-year-old, who never needed to be punished. He was also a natural follower, and his leader was his friend Henry Schnell. Hank was a young hellion, but a parent should think carefully before trying to pry a boy loose from his best friend. So I said that Hank might come.

Knowing Hank's tendency to dash wildly off towards anything that caught his interest, I warned the boys to stay close to me. We met Esau Drexel at the information desk and started towards the new wing. Then we stopped to talk to David Goldman. Professor Goldman was full of the argument, whether therapsid reptiles evolved into birds by developing feathers to fly with or developed feathers first

to keep warm and then adapted them to flying. Goldman was excited by what he said was new evidence on the question.

While we were listening, the boys disappeared. I guessed that Hank, typically, had dashed on ahead, through the Oceanic Hall towards the new wing and Stephen had followed. I did not worry about the boys. But, knowing Henry Schnell, I did worry about the museum.

When we got to the Hall of Oceanic Anthropology, the first thing that caught my eye was the tiki of Atea. On the statue, someone had painted, with one of those thick, felt-tipped pens that kids use to make graffiti on subway cars, a big, crude mustache.

While I stammered humble apologies for my young savages, Drexel said, "Never mind, Willy. I'm sure it'll wash off, even if it's the indelible kind. The statue's varnished. Some idiot put a coat of varnish on at the time of the First World War, and we've never taken it off. Now it's a good thing."

Then I heard another sentence. It said clearly: "You shall rue your insolence, mortal!"

I jumped and stared at Drexel. My boss was looking at the statue, with his hands in his pockets and his mouth closed. Anyway, I could hardly imagine Esau Drexel's telling anyone he should rue his

insolence. That was not his style. In one of his more pompous moods, he might have said: "My good man, you'll be sorry for this!"

While I was staring, the same voice added: "You and your seed, both!"

Drexel had not opened his mouth, nor had he given any sign of hearing the voice. Nobody else was nearby. I must, I thought, be getting auditory hallucinations. Naturally, I did not want to say anything to Drexel to cause him to suspect that such was the case. I wondered whether I should consult a neurologist or a psychiatrist. I knew a couple of nice, gentle shrinks ...

"Well," growled Drexel, "let's catch your little bums before they do something else."

On we went. At the end of Oceanic Hall is a small, square hall housing, on this floor, a mineral exhibition. It has no logical place there, but, then, museum halls seldom do. As fast as one director begins to get things in what he thinks is a logical order, another director takes his place and starts moving them around again.

It is like one of those puzzles in which you move little wooden blocks in a box, this way and that to bring them into some desired array. In a museum, nobody lives long enough to complete one solution of

the problem. The minerals had been left over from some previous arrangement.

The mineral hall opens on the new wing. This is not really a wing but a fourth side to a hollow square. On the far end of the new wing was another side of the square, housing some of the museum's working and storage spaces. Visitors seldom realize that more space is devoted to these purposes than to exhibition halls. Any mature museum has far more specimens than it can show at any one time. Besides the fourth side of the square, a huge maze of cellars also contains storage and preparation rooms.

In Mineral Hall, we caught up with the boys. They tried to look casual and innocent but could not help smirking and snickering.

They vigorously denied putting a mustache on Atea. When I searched them, I did not find any felt-tipped pen or similar instrument. I supposed that they had ditched it. While I might be morally certain that they had done this vandalism, I could not prove it. One of them must have stood on the other's back or shoulders to reach the statue's bug-eyed face.

"Come on," said Drexel, opening the locked door with a key. Beyond lay the second story of the new wing, the incomplete Crustacean Hall.

There were the usual wall cases and central cases, most of them with their cover glasses still off. The central cases formed a continuous row down the middle of the hall.

Crustaceans of all sizes and shapes were mounted, but only half the spaces in the cases had been filled. There was a lobster that must have weighed thirty pounds alive. There was a Pacific coconut crab almost as big as that lobster. There were gaudily colored stomatopods and other scuttly creatures.

There were signs of work in progress: a stepladder standing in the fairway, pails, a fire extinguisher, stacks of panes of glass, tools, a box of fasteners to hold the glass of the cases in place. Muttering something about "slobs," Drexel began moving these things into the corners to give the hall a tidier look. I helped him.

Drexel pointed to a blank wall space. "A giant spider crab would go well there, I think."

The boys were getting restless. Few of them can maintain interest for very long in static exhibits. Drexel was spouting his enthusiasm. I gently suggested:

"How about the hall in which these things are being prepared, Esau? I think they'd like that."

"Sure thing!" said Drexel.

He unlocked another door, at the far end of the Crustacean Hall, and led us into one of the prepara-

tion halls, which smelled of formaldehyde. There were workbenches, on which the preparators had been painstakingly cleaning the meat out of crabs, shrimps, and other denizens of the deep before wiring them up for mounting. There were racks with dried specimens, and jars and tanks with others floating in preservative. None of the scientists or technicians was at work that day.

The biggest object was a huge metal tank, nearly full of liquid. In it lay what looked at first like a disorganized tangle of the limbs of some fictional super-spider — Tolkien's Shelob, for instance.

"We just got these in," said Drexel. "I didn't catch these beauties. The *Lemuria* got 'em off the Aleutians."

"What are they?" asked Stephen. "They look horrible."

"They," said Drexel, "are the so-called Japanese spider crab, *Macrocheira kampferi*. I don't see what call the Japs have to claim them when they're found all over the Pacific north of latitude forty. And they're not horrible. They're beautiful — at least, to another spider crab."

"How many are there? They're all tangled up so I can't tell."

"Four," said Drexel. "We figure on mounting the biggest and keeping the rest in storage."

"Are they man-eaters?" asked Henry.

"They're harmless, although I suppose if you went scuba diving and bothered one, it would defend itself ... Yes, Angela?"

A young woman had come in, through the door at the far end of the hall. "Mr. Drexel, Mrs. Drexel wants you on the telephone. You can use the one in my office."

"Excuse me, Willy," said Drexel. "I'll be right back. You and the kids look at the stuff here. Don't let 'em touch anything."

Angela's heels went click, click as the two marched out the door at the far end. The door slammed shut.

I bent over the tank with the spider crabs. They were tremendous creatures, the biggest with legs four to six feet long and chelae of eight or ten feet. One of those nippers, I thought, could easily take off a human hand or foot.

"What's that stuff? Water?" asked Stephen.

"Formaldehyde, I suppose," I said. "Don't stick your finger in it and then in your mouth to find out."

"Yech!" said Hank. "Putting the stuff those things have been lying dead in, in your mouth!"

"Well, you eat crab out of a can, don't you?" said Stephen. "And it's dead, isn't it?"

"Not me," said Hank. "I don't eat no dead monsters. Say!"

"What?" I asked.

"Did Mister — you know — the old guy — your friend —"

"Mr. Drexel," said Stephen.

"Mr. Drexel — did he say they were dead?"

"Of course he did," I said. He had not, but I was not about to make a point of it.

"Well, they ain't. They're moving."

"You're crazy, Hank," said Stephen.

"Look there!" said Hank. "His legs are wriggling, like he was waking up."

"Just your imag — Hey, Dad, take a look!"

I did. As I looked, all four crabs stirred, gathered their tangled limbs under them, and stood up. They rose from the liquid like Venus from the sea foam, only it would take a more avid seafood lover than I to see any resemblance to Venus. They were a pale, bone-like gray, with bits of olive-green sponge and other marine growths adhering to them.

The boys and I jumped back from the tank. The boys shrieked.

Stepping deliberately, the four crabs climbed dripping out of the tank. Led by the biggest of all, they started towards us, chelae extended and open.

"Run!" I yelled. "This way! Don't let 'em lay a claw on you! They'll take your heads off!"

I started for the Crustacean Hall. The boys dashed past me. Behind us, in single file, came the four spider crabs, their clawed feet going clickety-click on the tiles.

The crabs did not move faster than a brisk walk. Amazed and horrified though I was, I did not, being in good shape for a man past forty, expect any trouble in out-running them.

When the boys got to the far end of the Crustacean Hall ahead of me, they tried the door. It would not open.

I caught up with them and heaved on the knob. The door was shut on a snap lock, to keep out the unauthorized. It could only be opened with a key, and the key was in Esau Drexel's pocket.

The four crabs came clattering down the Crustacean Hall, along one side of the row of central cases. I yelled and banged the door, to no avail.

"Boys!" I said. "They're on one side of the cases. We'll run back on the other and try the other door."

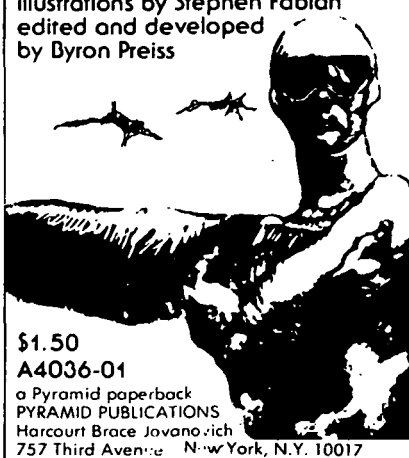
The crabs were now a mere ten feet from us. We dashed back up the hall on the other side of the central cases. The crabs continued their course. They came to the end of the row of central cases, rounded it like Roman racing chariots rounding the end of the *spina*, and continued their pursuit.

We went back through the

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Crustacean Hall, through the Mineral Hall, and through the preparation hall. After us came the crabs.

The door at the far end of the preparation hall was also locked. I fruitlessly yelled and banged some more.

As the crabs clicked past the big tank on one side, the boys and I ran the other way on the other side. We made the Crustacean Hall all right. Then, when I looked back, my heart sank. The crabs, or the spirit of Atea, or whatever motivated the monsters, had done the obvious thing. The crabs had split up into two pairs. One pair approached on either side of the row of central cases. Now there was no way to get

past them, and so we could not continue to play ring-around-the-rosy with them. They had us.

I kicked the door and nearly burst my lungs screaming. I looked around for something to use as a club. Since the crabs were slow and clumsy, I thought I might have a chance of bashing in a carapace or two before they got me. At least, I thought, I might save the boys.

When the crabs were over half-way down the hall, I saw something in a corner. It was the fire extinguisher that Drexel had moved out of the way. This was of the big cylindrical type that you turn upside down.

I grabbed that extinguisher, inverted it, and pointed the nozzle on the end of the hose at the nearest crab. I had no time to read the directions and only hoped I was following proper procedure.

The extinguisher made a great fizzing. Liquid shot from the nozzle, spraying all over the crab. The creature halted, waving its chelae in a disorganized way.

I sprayed another, and another, and another, and then back to the first one. I don't know what chemicals were in the extinguisher, but the crabs teetered on their spindly legs. They waved their chelae wildly, banged into the cases, and fell over. One lay on its back with twitching legs. Another collapsed against a case

When Esau Drexel came in a few minutes later, he found four motionless crabs and one motionless banker. The last-mentioned leaned breathlessly against a case and held an empty extinguisher.

"But — but that's impossible!" said Drexel when he heard the story.

I shrugged. I have had too many funny things happen to me to be very free with the word "impossible."

When the door to the Crustacean Hall was unlocked, others came in. Drexel told a guard to admit only museum personnel. The boys and I repeated our story.

Doctor Einarson, the assistant curator of Pacific anthropology, spoke up. He talked with a funny little smile, as if hinting that we were not to take him seriously.

"Put a mustache on Atea?" he said. "No wonder. She's a goddess, you know. No mustaches for her!"

The following Monday, when the whole museum was closed, you would have seen one junior banker and his wife, with a stepladder, a bucket, a sponge, a scrubbing brush, and soap. They were painstakingly erasing the mustache on Atea's tiki.

It must have worked, because nothing more like that has happened to me in the museum in all the years since.

Some frantic action on the planet Barafunda, as an old favorite, free-lance writer Jose Silvera, sets out to collect his ghostwriting fee from a Barafundian lizard lyricist ...

Lunatic At Large

by RON GOULART

The aircar cleared, discreetly, its throat.

The warm naked red-haired girl pressed her fingertips harder into Jose Silvera's bare back. "Joey," she sighed, "my very own dearest Joey."

"Mary Elizabeth," said Silvera, his lips close to one of her ears, "could you call me something else beside Joey."

"I can't help resorting to diminutives," said Mary Elizabeth Trowbridge. "When a wave of passion seizes—"

"And let's see who's in the aircar which is just now landing on the A-List landing yard!" boomed a voice immediately outside their cabin windows.

Silvera found himself staring into the lens of a robot video camera and the bright blue eyes of a grinning lizard man in a purple dinner jacket. "Oops," said Silvera. "Black the windows, stupe."

"Miss Trowbridge," replied the voice of the aircar, "had earlier expressed a wish to see the myriad stars of the Barnum System night sky whilst being—"

"That was a prior mood," said Silvera. "Black the damn windows."

"It looks like our beloved novelist, Mary Elizabeth Trowbridge, spread-eagled under a dark saturnine man I don't recognize, folks," boomed the lizard announcer. "Yes, this 14th Annual Awards Banquet of the Barafunda Academy of Top Flight Writers is really attracting a celebrity crowd. Miss Trowbridge, as you know, is the authoress of such memorable best selling novels as *A Gentle Kiss beneath the Bows* and *Love's Gracious—*"

"Beneath the what?" Silvera rolled off the lovely authoress.

Mary Elizabeth sat up. "You agreed not to make fun of my

novels, Joey...Joe. Or would you prefer Jose?"

"Anything other than Joey." Barefooted he roamed the spacious cabin, hidden from the outside by the now-darkened windows.

"I don't insist you read all my books," said the redhead. "That's not necessary to ghost the new one for me....Still, if you love me, you might want to read them all."

"Why?" He pulled on his suit of duracloth underwear.

"Well, you might want to learn more about my heart and mind. It is in an artist's work, after all, that one finds the secrets of her innermost being."

"I thought Hershman from Murdstone came out here to Barafunda to ghost your last three books." He got into his trousers, seamed them.

Mary Elizabeth shrugged. "You're surely an unsentimental son of a bitch." She stood, slipped a thin lycra evening dress on.

"You forgot your undergarments," Silvera pointed out as he hunched into his evening coat.

"I never wear lingerie in public." She bent from the waist, picked her gunbelt from the aircar floor and strapped it around her narrow waist. "We still haven't gone sujo hunting."

"Don't even know what a sujo is."

"They're birds. I told you

that." Mary Elizabeth shook her pretty head. "You don't actually listen to anything I say to you, Jose."

"When a wave of passion washes over me," he told her, "it seems to affect my hearing."

"Oh, screw you," said Mary Elizabeth.

The aircar coughed, inoffensively, again. "The banquet is, if I may be so bold as to make a comment, about to start. If you wish to see Mazda and Chatterton receive the award of which they are so richly—"

"Mazda and Chatterton?" Silvera spun to face the speaker box on the control panel. "Mazda and Chatterton are at this thing tonight?"

"I told you that, too, Jose," said the girl, tightening her gunbelt a notch tighter. "You simply don't heed a single—"

"Mazda owes me \$10,000." Silvera's dark face showed anger.

Mary Elizabeth smiled. "Don't tell me you did some ghostwriting for them? I didn't know you went in for political propaganda."

"When you're a freelance writer, you write what comes along," he answered. "I was out here on Barafunda six months ago, a deal set up by a local literary agent named Pablo Tammany and—"

"Poor Pablo," sighed Mary

Elizabeth. "What a nice fellow he was...really quite tender-hearted, for an agent. They put him away, you know...he's in Comfortable State Asylum No. 6."

"No, he's not," said Silvera. "He escaped a week ago. I went out there the day I arrived on your planet, to see if he could explain why Mazda had never paid me."

"Oh, poor Pablo a fugitive. At large somewhere in Lixo Territory."

Thump! Thump!

The aircar rocked and bonged as a heavy fist pounded on the blacked windows. "Miss Trowbridge, I'm sure your myriad fans would be elated to see you on their home screens," shouted the lizard man. "How about an interview?"

Thump! Thump! Thump!

"I guess I'd better grant it, Jose," said the girl. "Um...don't mention that you're...um...helping me with my manuscript, will you?"

"I'll tell them I'm your gigolo." Silvera caught the handle of the cabin door, opened it.

"Here she is, folks...Oops, no, this is the big swarthy fellow we saw the backside of a few minutes ago." The lizard announcer thrust a gleaming silver microphone up at Silvera. "I smell a romance, sir. Mind telling us who you are and all about your relationship with Miss Trowbridge?"

"I'm Jose Silvera," said Silvera,

stepping onto the silver-flecked surface of the celebrity landing area which spread out at the rear of the Municipal Banquet Dome. "I'm doing my Ph.D. thesis at the University of Jupiter on the life and works of Miss Trowbridge. To me there is in her work a delicate quality of—"

"And here is Miss Trowbridge herself, folks." The lizard and his robot camera pushed by Silvera, closing in on the lovely red-haired novelist.

At the edge of the vast lot milled hundreds of people, humanoid, lizard, cat. Here and there among the crowd vendors and hawkers had set up their stands. You saw a lot of street peddlers in Lixo Territory. There was a bedraggled catman selling packets of snuff, a fat old woman trying to interest the celebrity fans in balls of neoyarn, a lizard man offering caged birds for sale. And there was a thin blond young man with a slateboard on an easel. He was scratching words on the big slate with yellow chalk, talking, from the look of it at this distance, very rapidly and disconnectedly. The words he'd just written on the slate were TRUTH and MURDER.

"Pablo Tammany!" exclaimed Silvera.

He started running across the landing lot, zigzagging between the shining, highly polished aircars.

Before Silvera reached the high lucite fence which held back the pressing crowd, three wheel-footed cyborg cops came rolling along the street out there.

"Break it up, you bums!"

"No peddling around here, rumdums!"

"Move along, move along! Or we'll run you in!"

The vendors started to scatter, grabbing up their wares and pushing paths through the bystanders. All except Pablo. Babbling something, he held his ground and erased TRUTH and MURDER with the sleeve of his tattered nightcoat. He scribbled PRINCE LORENZO IS DEAD!

Prince Lorenzo was the ruler of Lixo Territory and was due to present the Rudy awards at tonight's festivities. There'd been no announcement about his passing on any of the newscasts Silvera'd watched before leaving for the dome.

"Hey, Pablo," he called through cupped hands. "Hey, it's me, Silvera!"

The catman snuff seller pushed up beside Pablo, grabbed his arm and tugged. The slate fell over as he dragged the frenzied-looking literary agent off with him.

By the time Silvera got to the street, there was no trace of Pablo Tammany or the catman. Several people asked for his autograph.

"Now, Jose, I don't think it would be sedate to—"

Silvera leaped up from their floating table for two and went trotting toward the dais. He had to nudge his way through over a hundred other tables.

Up on the floating stage Prince Lorenzo, apparently alive, was holding a pair of golden statuettes and saying, "...surely the propaganda operetta has come of age in our own...um...age. And if one were to take a vote...well, that's exactly what we have done, isn't it?" He was a chubby, yellow-haired man of thirty five, dressed in a three-piece formal princeluit.

Next to him stood a gaunt greying catman and a corpulent lizard man. The lizard was Mazda, and it was Mazda who first noticed the swift approach of Silvera.

"...who but geniuses could have given us such uplifting yet entertaining works of art as *The Singing Tax Assessor*, *The Magnificent Defense Contractor*, *The Whistling Secretary of Education*, *The....*"

Mazda punched his gaunt partner, inclining his head toward the audience of banqueters.

The catman blinked at the glare of floating lightstrip mobiles, shaded his eyes, then gulped.

"\$10,000," called Silvera, getting closer.

Mazda squatted at the edge of the dais. "Ixnay, Joe," he whispered. "This is our moment of triumph."

"\$10,000," repeated Silvera, "right now."

"Listen, Joe," said the lizard lyricist, "you ought to let Pablo Tammany handle this."

The several hundred people in the large room were noticing the confrontation between Silvera and Mazda. Murmuring commenced, a slight amount of polite heckling.

"...tunes you can sing, lyrics you can mumble...."

Silvera caught hold of the vinyl lapels of Mazda's formal tunic. "You've owed me the dough for six months, Mazda. \$10,000 for the ghosting of the book and lyrics of *The Yodeling Bureaucrat*."

"Amscray," pleaded Mazda, on his hands and knees now. Perspiration dotted his scaly green face. "We'll send a check to Pablo first thing in the morning."

"Pablo's a hopeless lunatic," reminded Silvera, pulling the lyricist's sweating green face closer to his. "Right now he's running around loose in the streets of Lixo. He's not—"

"How do you know...." Chatterton knelt next to his collaborator. "...Pablo Tammany is running around in the streets? He's been missing for a week."

"I saw him out front tonight,

but he got away before I could reach him."

"You saw—"

"Look, Joe, I don't want to be a bastard about this," said Mazda, "but I signed the papers with Pablo. Unless you can produce him I'm not going to pay."

"You'll pay the \$10,000 or—"

Across the room Mary Elizabeth screamed.

Three large palace guards descended on Silvera from behind. He became aware of them just as one of them whapped him across the head with a stunrod.

After snarling twice, Silvera picked up the talkstick. "Okay," he said into it, "Chapter 6 of *The First Sweet Blush*."

Across the sunlit circular bedroom a robot typing machine began clacking softly. Butterflies danced through the blossoms pressing against the faintly tinted windows.

"It was with heavy heart," dictated Silvera from his circular floating bed, "that Audrey ventured forth from the flower-decked gazebo after her recent interview with Nugent Penlapp."

"You don't have to work this morning," said Mary Elizabeth as she came into the room. "After being stunned last night and then stepped on by several members of the palace guard and then—"

"I want to get my day's dictating out of the way," he said, "before I go hunting for Pablo Tammany. She had, fearing the worst, unburdened her trusting young heart to the cynical Nugent. The consequences had been, if anything—"

"You can't go hunting for poor Pablo," said the red-haired novelist. "I promised Prince Lorenzo you'd lie low for the rest of your stay in Lixo. Even as it is, he's convinced you're probably an assassin working for KAML."

"...much worse than the fair young girl had anticipated. What's KAML?"

"The Kill All Monarchs League." She sat on the edge of his bed. "You really ought to dig deeper into the background of the planets you work on, Joe."

"She had told Nugent of her deep and abiding love for Norbert Trell, and he, Nugent, had...I don't need political overtones for this kind of fiction, Mary Eliz."

"Oh, my work isn't as shallow as all that. Remember in *The Prime Minister's Long Engagement* I had—"

"Is there really a danger of Prince Lorenzo's being killed off by these KAML guys?"

"The prince seems to think so." She poked a warm fingertip into Silvera's ear. "Had it not been for my considerable reputation in the

territory, Joe, they'd have locked you up as a KAML supporter."

"I never, until today, heard of K—"

Thud! Thump!

A man, a large fellow with a substantial mustache and an outthrust jaw, had come sailing through the clear country morning to thunk, head foremost, into one of the plexiwindows of the bedroom. He then bounced back down into the garden.

"Another interviewer?" Silvera hopped out of bed.

"No, it seems to be...."

"Oh, of all the bloody dratted hellfire and damnation idiotic things!" The man, untangling himself from a very believable artificial thornbush, was roaring at someone or something that couldn't be seen from the bedroom.

"Yes," said the lovely Mary Elizabeth, "it's Hugo Swinkler."

Silvera frowned and, still not enthusiastic about current styles on the planet, put on a tufted bathrobe and tied its sash. "The eminent novelist?"

"Oh, have you read his—"

"Rotten bloody blasted blazing idiotic creature!" Hugo Swinkler was shouting outside. "I'll teach you a ruddy dingblasted bloody lesson, throwing me like that!"

The girl opened a window. "Hugo, how nice to see you," she said out into the pleasant morning.

"Bloody rotten nice seeing me land on my ruddy arse in your ringing dinging begonias, eh?" Swinkler growled deep in his broad chest.

"It was your head which landed in them, Hugo, and they're synthetic roses. Now why don't you come in and—"

"Just look at that dratted bloody fool of a bag of nuts and bolts, will you? Leering and smirking at me to beat the ruddy band."

There was a robot horse, chrome-plated, standing at the edge of the patio, uneasy.

"I'm sure he—"

"I'm sure I'll wring his blankety blanking neck," promised Swinkler. "Then I'll remove his—"

"Bad for your reputation," Silvera said from an open window.

"Who asked you to stick your artsy smartsy nose into my affairs?"

"Surely," added Mary Elizabeth, "the author of *Rotten Conditions*, *Lousy Pay* and many another brilliant novel about the pitiable conditions of the down-trodden wouldn't throttle a horse in broad daylight."

Swinkler scowled. "I suppose I could wait until after dark to give the ruddy bloody idiotic beast his—"

"I meant you ought not to harm him at all," said the girl. The

sunlight made her brilliantly red hair glow.

"Couldn't I at least kick his ruddy arse a few times?"

"Much nicer if you join us for breakfast." She made a come-in gesture with one slender-fingered hand.

"Well...." The burly social realist shifted from foot to foot. "I did drop over here to have a bit of a chat with this dago you're collaborating with, Mary Liz. Would that be you, sir?"

"I'm Jose Silvera," said Silvera. "What's on your mind?"

"I hear you're going to hunt for Pablo Tammany," replied Swinkler, twisting his mustache. "I'd like, if I might, to lend a hand."

"Oh, that would be most helpful, wouldn't it, Joe?" said Mary Elizabeth. "Pablo's probably wandering, in his poor lunatic fashion, through the worst parts of Lixo. No one is more familiar with the lower depths than Hugo."

"What say, Silvera? Is it a ruddy blasted deal?"

"We can talk about it at breakfast," said Silvera.

"Is that a smirk I see on your swarthy arrogant face, sir?"

Silvera lowered his bill of fare to look up at the massive young man in the skyblue synsilk suit. The massive young man had just come striding over to the pub table

Silvera was sharing with Hugo Swinkler. "I tell you," he said, "I got clunked on the head with a stunrod last night. It could be some of my smirk muscles are still affected. Excuse it."

"Have you ever heard such a cowardly reply?" the massive youth, hands on hips, asked the other patrons of the Sign of the Rat & the Cheese Pub. "Why this dark-hued fellow positively cringes. Yet he was brave enough to smirk scornfully when I playfully inserted the lighted table candle into a handy orifice of yonder serving wench android."

"See here," said Swinkler, in his loudest voice, "you blanking dratted bloody youthful oaf...I'll thank you to leave your betters alone! We're frequenting this low dive in this disreputable sector for good and sufficient reasons and, young sir, we'll have no more of your blasted ruddy insolence."

"Indeed, you bewiskered churl! I'll have you know I am the sole heir to an estate worth near three million rovics."

"Is that good?" inquired Silvera. "I usually get paid in Barnum dollars, so I'm not up on all the local currency. Still if—"

Smack!

The young man had slapped Silvera across the face. "I trust you are not also ignorant of our customs, sir."

"Why you bloody brash blinking pup," bellowed Swinkler, half rising from his chair. "Am I to understand you're challenging us to a duel?"

"That I am, but only your near-blackamoor friend."

Silvera didn't leave his chair. "Go away," he suggested to the angered young man.

"Did you hear that?" the youth demanded of the patrons. "This smirking fellow has told Haven McQuarter to go away. Not highly likely, sir."

Swinkler leaned across the table. "Why don't you see if you can divert the fellow for a moment or so, Silvera? I'll flit out and fetch a ruddy blasted officer of the law." Not waiting for an okay, the realistic novelist bounded to the pseudo-oak door, dived out into the midday street.

"Did you all witness that? The cur turned tail and ran. And I'll wager you'd like to do the same thing had you but...off!"

Silvera shoved the table hard, smashing its edge into McQuarter's groin. While the young man was dancing with pain, Silvera stood and brought the candle-holding wine bottle down over his head.

"Unfair," muttered the young man.

Silvera grabbed McQuarter's ears, slammed the youth's face into his rising knee.

The young man groaned. He said, "Did you see how...." All at once he toppled to the plank floor, unconscious.

"Here now," put in a nearby patron, "that's hardly a fair way to fight a duel, my boy."

"Granted," said Silvera, "but I don't have time for a duel just now."

"Still...hardly sporting," remarked another customer of the pub.

"Okay," Silvera told them, "if anybody else is offended, I can give you another five minutes. Then I really have to go."

He dropped some Barnum dollars to the table, eased toward the street door.

There were no further complaints.

A uniformed Territorial Policeman was wrestling with an old woman directly across the street from the pub. Silvera crossed the cobblestones.

"Peddle spurious relics, will you!" said the police officer as he attempted to get an armlock on the hefty old woman.

"Bless you, honey bunch, these are all certified bones of religious martyrs and—"

"Excuse me." Silvera bent over the struggling pair.

"If it's business with this lady you've in mind, sir," gasped the cop, "she's closed up."

"Oh, let the lad buy a sacred bone. It'll bring him luck in his business ventures, add an inch to his diddlywacker, give him—"

"Only had a question for you, officer."

"Well, sir, I'll try my best to answer it. Though I hope it's not directions you're wanting. I need my hands for subduing this vicious crone and won't be able to point out any—"

"How long have you been out here?"

"Seems like an eternity." The well-set-up vendor gave the policeman one in the ribs. "Actually, it's closer to half an hour."

"I'm curious about a friend of mine. Has he spoken to you within the past ten minutes? Big fellow with a mustache that sticks out to here."

"Nobody's talked to me except this old witch, sir."

"I saw your chum," volunteered the old woman. "He took off like the proverbial grout with a hot bean up its snarf a few minutes ago."

"Thanks. That's what I figured." Silvera was about to say something further, but then he saw a figure pass the intersection up ahead.

It was the bedraggled catman snuff dealer. The man who'd helped Pablo Tammany get away from the police last night.

Silvera went after him.

Dr. Fung moved his head an inch to the right to avoid the water dripping down from above. "Yes, I am Dr. Fung," he said. He was a rotund green-skinned man with tufts of coppery hair above his large ears. "Usually I don't interview prospective members for my Fung's Spas personally. However, an author of your reputation deserves—"

"I want to talk to Pablo Tammany." Silvera was sitting across an amber lucite desk from the spa-chain owner. Mist, pale blue, was swirling around his ankles.

"A brilliant young fellow, until his unfortunate...." A new dripping from above commenced, and Dr. Fung had to bob to avoid the two streams. "What gives you the notion I'd know where—"

"A snuff peddler known as Tarragon Slim brought Pablo Tammany here last night, a few steps ahead of the cops." The blue mist was rising, spinning around Silvera's knees.

Dr. Fung took a sponge from a desk drawer, set it down in one of the drip puddles. The sponge, of its own volition, began mopping up. "You are a writer for hire, Mr. Silvera," Fung said. "Even so, I have heard that you possess a certain amount of integrity."

"A certain amount, yeah. Why's Pablo here?"

The spa owner eyed the ceiling. "Our spacious, comfortably heated pool is a mite on the blink," he said. A drip of water took him in the eye. "Each of the twenty-two conveniently located Fung Spas in Lixo has a spacious, comfortably heated indoor pool wherein you can swim, relax, make casual acquaintances or lifelong—"

"Pablo," reminded Silvera.

"I'm assuming I can trust you. Pablo is my guest at the moment," said Dr. Fung. "It is a complex and intricate story." The sponge crawled up on one of his green hands; he swatted it off with the other. "Basically he is here to keep KAML from killing him."

"I thought that Kill All Monarchs League bunch only killed monarchs."

"Primarily, except they're miffed with Pablo." Fung stood up. "Come along, I'll let you talk to him. He can, if he's in one of his coherent phases, explain all this far better than I."

The swirling bluish mist was now waist-high. Dr. Fung said, "Our pleasant steam room is on the frizt a little, too."

"I noticed."

The spa corridor was thick with manufactured fog. From the steam room came cries of "Yike! It's too hot!" and "Mercy! Turn it down!"

"Possibly the thermostatic equipment isn't quite functioning at the peak of perfection." Dr. Fung led Silvera to an oval door. He inserted his green fingers in the printlock.

Pablo Tammany, concentrating on printing on his slate, was sitting across the yellow-walled room in a neoprene chair. "PRINCE LORENZO IS DEAD!" he wrote. "KAML KILLED HIM! TWICE! THRICE!"

"Pablo," said Silvera.

"Oh, hi, Joe." The young agent dropped his chalk into the slate trough. "Didn't know you were back on Barafunda."

"I'm doing some work for Mary Elizabeth Trowbridge."

"Very gifted girl," said Pablo. "I've been having a difficult time of it lately, Joe. Not that the agent's life is ever any bed of xirches. KAML is down on me, and the government people had me railroaded into Comfortable State Asylum No. 6."

Silvera asked, "Why'd they do it?"

Pablo replied, "All my troubles are because of the Stoneboat manuscript, Joe."

"That'd be E. Ned Stoneboat?"

"Right, Stoneboat the spy," said the unsettled agent. "He quit the government Spy Service a few months back, decided to write his memoirs. Now, memoirs isn't a

category which is all that popular on this planet, as you may know. Stoneboat, though, really turned out a sensational book. It was hard hitting and didn't pull any punches. It cast new light on the issues, ripped the lid off several juicy scandals and spilled several cans of beans. Not only that, he had a lot of information about who's really behind KAML. The biggest revelation, however, was the inside dope on the assassination of Prince Lorenzo."

"I saw Prince Lorenzo only last night. Some of his—"

"That's not the same Prince Lorenzo." Pablo grabbed up his chalk to, swiftly, write NOT THE SAME! on his slate.

"There's more than one Prince Lorenzo?"

"This one is...what is it, doc? Number four or number five?"

Dr. Fung said, "He is the fifth Prince Lorenzo."

"See, Joe, the KAML people keep killing Prince Lorenzo, since they have agents in some surprisingly high places," explained Pablo. "His cabinet and inner circle, they keep replacing him."

"How?"

"We think this latest one is an android," said Dr. Fung. "The other unfortunate fellows are somewhat my fault, I'm afraid. About three years—"

"Yow! Yow!" screamed some-

one in the corridor.

"I hope we get the steam fixed soon. Now then...about three years ago I invented, as a part of my spa researches, a wonderful new product I called Nu-Faz. Does the name convey the idea? New Face, you see?"

"I see," admitted Silvera. "Something to change people's appearance?"

"Exactly, yes. I was, unfortunately, excessively patriotic at that period of my life. Rather than use Nu-Faz commercially, I donated it to our government. There'd been complaints about funny-looking typists in government offices, and I, rather naively, thought Nu-Faz would be used only for—"

"They betrayed him," said Pablo. "The story is detailed in the Stoneboat manuscript. Trouble is, once the government got word the book exposed them, they tossed me and Stoneboat into the lunatic bin. Being somewhat cleverer than Stoneboat, despite his spy training, I escaped before they got much out of me. I came here to my old friend and client, Dr. Fung. We had a big-hit bestseller a couple seasons back. *The Fung Spa 101 Healthful Sandwich Cook Book*. Don't know if you had a chance to read—"

"Why are you roaming the streets with the slate?"

Pablo bowed his head. "The time I spent in the hatch, Joe, had

an effect on me. And the nerve-wracking experience of having both KAML and the government desirous of my death has taken its toll. I have to admit that I have periods when I am less than rational." He looked across at Silvera, fisted his palm. "But, damn it, things are a mess here in Lixo and someone has to speak out. KAML is running rampant, the so-called legitimate government is a sham and a farce. Lord, if only the Stoneboat manuscript could see the light of day."

"You should be able to get it published in another territory."

"Sure, if I could get it over to Polegada Territory, for instance. The thing is I live, except during my slate-writing moments, in dread of—"

"Where is the book?"

"Hidden," replied the agent. "I got a warning they were coming to drag me off to the fun factory. Had a chance to hide some of my papers."

"Would our contract with Mazda be among the papers you stashed?"

"Why, yes, I believe so." Pablo blinked. "Hasn't Mazda paid you?"

"Nope. Where's the stuff hidden?"

Pablo sat up, wrote GOOD IDEA! on his slate. "Say, what a good idea, Joe. You could get the

Stoneboat manuscript at the same time you got the contract. Take the book to McCutcheon & Hope over in Polegada. They've expressed interest."

"Okay, so tell me exactly where you hid everything."

Pablo grinned. "I'll do better than that, I'll draw you a picture."

A catwoman carrying a talking vacuum-cleaner came strolling along the woodland path. She smiled over at Silvera, her whiskers perking up. "I really wanted the singing bun-warmer, except they're all out until next month."

"Oh, so?" He was leaning, arms folded, against a wide tree at the edge of the forest trail.

"But a talk-vac isn't so bad, is it? I mean to say, it's company."

"How'd you acquire it in this wilderness?"

She nodded her furry head in the direction she'd come from. "Why, at the Wilderness Branch of the City National Territorial Savings Bank. It's in the clearing back there," the catwoman replied. "City Nat lives up to their slogan... 'More branches than a zanga tree.' Of course, this particular branch isn't the safest one would want. I been held up thrice, sexually assaulted once and treed by a bear since I opened my account. Still, they give the best gifts for a deposit of 250 rovics or more. Although the

pawprint slot is dreadfully tight and whenever I identify myself I have the devil's own time getting my paw back. Well, I must be getting along."

"Toodle-oo," said the vac.

"Nice meeting both of you." Silvera waited until she had gone around a bend in the trail. It was the sound of her approach a few moments ago which had caused him to stop still at the side of the path.

He continued along the trail until he came to the tree Pablo Tammany had told him about, the bole had PT carved on it. Silvera recognized the style of lettering Pablo used on his portable slate.

He left the trail, pushed into the underbrush. Counting off twenty paces, he glanced down. No sign of anything. He took a few more steps and found the pile of stones.

Silvera dropped to his knees, scooped the stones away and began digging with the small trowel he'd been carrying under his two-piece hiking suit. After a few minutes of digging, the trowel scraped against the lid of a syntin box. Silvera extracted the box from the earth.

"Very good, Joe. It would have taken me twice as long to do the digging. I'm simply not in the shape—"

"Mazda."

The lizard man was standing quite near, a deathgun in his hand.

"Not much for digging, but I'm a whiz at tracking. I've been on your trail since our little attempt to snuff you at the pub went blooey."

"Figured Swinkler had set me up," said Silvera. "Since only you and Chatterton knew I was planning to hunt up Pablo, it also figured you put Swinkler up to the job."

"I'm glad he didn't kill you," said the lizard lyricist. "Since the Stoneboat manuscript is undoubtedly in that box."

"Along with our contract."

"Utsnay to you, Joe. One thing you're never going to see is that \$10,000."

"Which side are you on, the government or KAML?"

"Oh, I'm a loyalist," said Mazda. "Being a government agent pays even better than the operettas. Know what I took in last year?"

"Including the \$10,000 you owe me?"

"Quipping to the end, huh, Joe? It's what they call gallows...urk!"

Still on his knees, Silvera had suddenly stabbed the trowel into the lizard man's leg. He grabbed the lyricist's foot, levered him over into the brush. Leaping up, he kicked the deathgun away.

"Ixnay, ixnay," protested Mazda. "I was going to kill you nice and clean. No need to get nasty now."

Silvera picked up him and

knocked him down.

"...can have come over me?" she asked herself, placing one fragile hand to her agitated bosom. 'I have not swooned in ever so long!' 'Perhaps,' suggested the handsome and presentable Duke of Oakham, 'the potent shaft of the bow of that cherubic lad we dub—'

"Joe, you can dictate the rest of that when we arrive at the resort in Polegada Territory." Mary Elizabeth crossed the aircar cabin to put her hands on his shoulders.

The large swarthy writer dropped the talkstick. "All this intrigue has put us behind schedule."

The lovely novelist hugged him, then herself. "Taking a vacation in Polegada will be quite exciting."

They were high up in the blue afternoon, crossing the border of Lixo.

"This doesn't seem the time to be in Lixo," said Silvera.

"Not with so much political turmoil," agreed the girl. "Imagine Prince Lorenzo turning out to be an android. I suppose the whole entire government will topple." She took hold of his ear, tugged affectionately at the lobe. "I'm so pleased about Pablo Tammany being on the mend and—"

"About Silvera getting his \$10,000 from Mazda."

"I still don't understand why he capitulated."

"He didn't."

"Well, how'd you get that cash?"

"Mazda has an account with the City National Territorial Savings Bank," said Silvera. "I remembered that from another check of his Pablo'd showed me when I was out here before. There happened to be a branch of the bank near the place the manuscript and contracts were buried."

"But how'd you persuade

Mazda to withdraw \$10,000?"

"The branches have a printlock setup. You stick your fingers in, money comes out. In this case Mazda happened to be unconscious when I stuck his fingers in. The robots didn't notice."

"That's a flaw in the system, isn't it?"

"Every system has flaws." Silvera reached again for the talkstick.

The girl stopped him from doing that.



COLLECTOR'S ITEM

AUTOGRAPHED SPECIAL SILVERBERG ISSUE

Our April 1974 issue honored Robert Silverberg and featured "Born With The Dead," a highly acclaimed and award-winning novella.

Less than 200 of these issues have been signed by Mr. Silverberg, and we offer them while they last for \$3.00 each, which includes postage, envelope and handling.

The special issue also features a profile of Silverberg by Barry N. Malzberg, an article, "Robert Silverberg, The Compleat Writer," by Thomas Clareson, a Silverberg bibliography by Donald Tuck and a special cover by Ed Emsh.

MERCURY PRESS, INC. P.O. Box 56, Cornwall, Ct. 06753

ASIMOV'S COROLLARY

I just came back from Rensselaerville, New York, where, for the fifth year, I have led a four-day seminar on some futuristic topic. (This time it was on the colonization of space.) Some seventy to eighty people attended, almost all of them interested in science fiction, and all of them eager to apply their imaginations to the posing of problems and the suggesting of solutions.

The seminar only runs from a Sunday to a Thursday, but by Thursday there is mass heartbreak at the thought of leaving, and vast promises (usually kept) to return the next year.

This year we managed to persuade Ben Bova (editor of a magazine which shall be nameless in these august pages) and his charming wife, Barbara, to attend. They threw themselves into the sessions with a will and were beloved by all.

Finally came the end at Thursday noon, and, as is customary on these occasions, I was given a fancy pseudo-plaque testifying to my good nature and to my suave approach toward members of the opposite sex.*

* See my book *THE SENSUOUS DIRTY OLD MAN* (Walker, 1971)

ISAAC ASIMOV Science



A charming young woman, not quite five feet tall, made the presentation and in simple gratitude I placed my arm about her waist. Owing to her unusually short height, however, I didn't manage to get low enough and the result brought laughter from the audience.

Trying to dismiss this embarrassing faux pas (though I must admit that neither of us budged) I said, "I'm sorry, folks. That's just the Asimov grip."

And from the audience, Ben Bova (who, it seems appropriate to say in this particular connection, is my bosom buddy) called out, "Is that anything like the swine flu?"

I was wiped out, and what does one do when one has been wiped out by a beloved pal? Why, one turns about and proceeds to try to wipe out some other beloved pal. — In this case, Arthur C. Clarke.

In Arthur's book "Profiles of the Future" (Harper & Row, 1962) he advances what he himself calls "Clarke's Law." It goes as follows:

When a distinguished but elderly scientist states that something is possible, he is almost certainly right. When he states that something is impossible, he is very probably wrong.

Arthur goes on to give examples of "distinguished but elderly scientists" who have pished and tut-tutted all sorts of things that have come to pass almost immediately. Ernest Rutherford pooh-poohed the possibility of nuclear power, Vannevar Bush bah-humbugged inter-continental ballistic missiles, and so on.

But naturally when I read a paragraph like that, knowing Arthur as I do, I begin to wonder if, among all the others, he is thinking of me.

After all, I'm a scientist. I am not exactly a "distinguished" one, but non-scientists have gotten the notion somewhere that I am, and I am far too polite a person to subject them to the pain of disillusionment, so I don't deny it. And then, finally, I am a little over thirty and have been a little over thirty for a long time, so I qualify as "elderly" by Arthur's definition. (So does he, by the way, for he is — ha, ha — three years older than I am.)

Well, then, as a distinguished but elderly scientist have I been going around stating that something is impossible or, in any case, that that something bears no relationship to reality? Heavens, yes! In fact, I am rarely content to say that something is wrong and let it go at that. I make free use of terms and phrases like "nonsense," "claptrap," "stupid folly,"

"sheer idiocy," and many other bits of gentle and loving language.

Among currently popular aberrations, I have belabored without stint Velikovskianism (WORLDS IN CONFUSION, F&SF, October 1969), astrology (THE STARS IN THEIR COURSES, F&SF, August 1970), flying saucers (THE ROCKETING DUTCHMEN, February 1975) and so on.

While I haven't yet had occasion to treat these matters in detail, I also consider the views of von Daniken on ancient astronauts and Charles Berlitz on the Bermuda triangle to be hogwash. (I have met Charles Berlitz, who is very charming and of whom I am fond, but that doesn't alter my opinion.)

Doesn't Clarke's law make me uneasy, then? Don't I feel as though I am sure to be quoted extensively, and with derision, in some book written a century hence by some successor to Arthur?

No, I don't. Although I accept Clarke's law and think Arthur is right in his suspicion that the forward-looking pioneers of today are the backward-yearning conservatives of tomorrow*, I have no worries about myself. I am very selective about the scientific heresies I denounce, for I am guided by what I call Asimov's Corollary to Clarke's Law. Here is Asimov's Corollary:

When, however, the lay public rallies round an idea that is denounced by distinguished but elderly scientists, and supports that idea with great fervor and emotion — the distinguished but elderly scientists are then, after all, probably right.

But why should this be? Why should I, who am not an elitist, but an old-fashioned liberal and an egalitarian (see THINKING ABOUT THINKING, F&SF, January 1975), thus proclaim the infallibility of the majority, holding it to be infallibly wrong.

The answer is that human beings have the habit (a bad one, perhaps, but an unavoidable one) of being human, which is to say that they believe in that which comforts them.

For instance, there are a great many inconveniences and disadvantages to the Universe as it exists. As examples: you cannot live forever, you can't get something for nothing, you can't win every time, and so on, and so on (see KNOCK PLASTIC, F&SF, November 1967).

Naturally, then, anything which promises to remove these inconven-

* Heck, Einstein himself found he could not accept the uncertainty principle and, in consequence, spent the last thirty years of his life as a living monument and nothing more. Physics went on without him.

iences and disadvantages will be eagerly believed. The inconveniences and disadvantages remain, of course, but what of that?

To take the greatest, most universal, and most unavoidable inconvenience, consider death. Tell people that death does not exist and they will believe you and sob with gratitude at the good news. Take a census and find out how many human beings believe in life after death, in heaven, in the doctrines of spiritualism, in transmigration of souls. I am quite confident you will find a healthy majority, even an overwhelming one, in favor of side-stepping death by believing in its non-existence through one strategy or another.

Yet as far as I know there is not one piece of evidence ever advanced that would offer any hope that death is anything other than the permanent dissolution of the personality and that beyond it, as far as individual consciousness is concerned, there is nothing.

If you want to argue the point, present the evidence. I must warn you, though, that there are some arguments I won't accept.

I won't accept any argument from authority. ("The Bible says so.")

I won't accept any argument from internal conviction. ("I have faith it's so.")

I won't accept any argument from personal abuse. ("What are you, an atheist?")

I won't accept any argument from irrelevance. ("Do you think you have been put on this Earth just to exist for a moment of time?")

I won't accept any argument from anecdote. ("My cousin has a friend who went to a medium and talked to her dead husband.")

And when all that (and other varieties of non-evidence) are eliminated, there turns out to be nothing.

Then why do people believe? Because they want to. Because the mass desire to believe creates a social pressure that is difficult (and in most times and places dangerous) to face down. Because few people have had the chance of being educated into the understanding of what is meant by evidence or into the techniques of arguing rationally.

But mostly because they want to. And that is why a manufacturer of toothpaste finds it insufficient to tell you that it will clean your teeth almost as well as the bare brush will. Instead he makes it clear to you, more or less by indirection, that his particular brand will get you a very desirable sex-partner. People, wanting sex somewhat more intensely than they want clean teeth, will be the readier to believe.

Then, too, people generally love to believe the dramatic, and

incredibility is no bar to the belief, but is rather a positive help.

Surely we all know this in an age when whole nations can be made to believe in any particular bit of foolishness that suits their rulers, and can be made willing to die for it, too. (This age differs from previous ages in this, however, only in that the improvement of communications makes it possible to spread folly with much greater speed and efficiency.)

Considering the love of the dramatic, is it any surprise that millions are willing to believe, on mere say-so and nothing more, that alien spaceships are buzzing around the Earth and that there is a vast conspiracy of silence on the part of government and scientists to hide that fact? No one has ever explained what government and scientists hope to gain by such a conspiracy or how it can be maintained when every other secret is exposed at once in all its details, but what of that? People are always willing to believe in any conspiracy on any subject.

People are also willing and eager to believe in such dramatic matters as supposed ability to carry on intelligent conversations with plants, the supposed mysterious force that is gobbling up ships and planes in a particular part of the ocean, the supposed penchant of Earth and Mars to play ping-pong with Venus and the supposed accurate description of the result in the Book of Exodus, the supposed excitement of visits from extra-terrestrial astronauts in prehistoric times and their donation to us of our arts, techniques, and even some of our genes.

To make matters still more exciting, people like to feel themselves to be rebels against some powerful repressive force — as long as they are sure it is quite safe. To rebel against a powerful political, economic, religious, or social establishment is very dangerous, and very few people dare do it, except, sometimes, as an anonymous part of a mob. To rebel against the "scientific establishment," however, is the easiest thing in the world, and anyone can do it and feel enormously brave without risking as much as a hangnail.*

Thus, the vast majority who believe in astrology and think that the planets have nothing better to do than form a code that will tell them whether tomorrow is a good day to close a business deal or not, become all

* A reader once wrote me to say that the scientific establishment could keep you from getting grants, promotions, and prestige, could destroy your career and so on. That's true enough. Of course, that's not as bad as burning you at the stake or throwing you in a concentration camp which is what a real establishment could and would do, but even depriving you of an appointment is rotten. However, that works only if you are a scientist. If you are a non-scientist, the scientific establishment can do nothing more than make faces at you.

the more excited and enthusiastic about the bilge when a group of astronomers denounce it.

Again, when a few astronomers denounced Velikovsky they lent the man (and, by reflection, his followers) an aura of the martyr which he (and they) assiduously cultivate, though no martyr in the world has ever been harmed so little or helped so much by the denunciations.

I used to think, indeed, that it was entirely the scientific denunciations that had put Velikovsky over the top, and that had Harlow Shapley only had the *sang froid* to ignore the Velikovskian folly, it would quickly have died a natural death.

I no longer think so. I now have greater faith in the bottomless bag of credulity that human beings carry on their back. After all, consider von Daniken and his ancient astronauts. Von Daniken's books are even less sensible than Velikovsky's and are written far more poorly* and yet he does well. What's more, no scientist, as far as I know, has deigned to take notice of von Daniken. Perhaps they felt such notice would do him too much honor and would but do for him what it had done for Velikovsky.

So von Daniken has been ignored — and, despite that, is even *more* successful than Velikovsky is, and attracts more interest, and makes more money.

You see, then, how I choose my "impossibles." I decide that certain heresies are ridiculous and unworthy of any credit not so much because the world of science says "It is not so!" but because the world of non-science says "It is!" so enthusiastically. It is not so much that I have confidence in scientists being right, as I have in non-scientists being wrong.

I admit, by the way, that my confidence in scientists being right is somewhat weak. Scientists have been wrong, even egregiously wrong, many times. There have been heretics who have flouted the scientific establishment and have been persecuted (as far as the scientific establishment is able to persecute), and, in the end, it has been the heretic who has been proved right. This has happened not only once, I repeat, but many times.

Yet that doesn't shake the confidence with which I denounce those heresies I do denounce, for in the cases in which heretics have won out, the

* Velikovsky, to do him justice, is a fascinating writer and has an aura of scholarship that von Daniken utterly lacks.

public has almost always not been involved.

When something new in science is introduced, when it shakes the structure, when it must in the end be accepted, it is usually something that excites scientists, sure enough, but does not excite the general public — except perhaps to get them to yell for the blood of the heretic.

Consider Galileo to begin with, since he is the patron saint (poor man!) of all self-pitying crackpots. To be sure, he was not persecuted primarily by scientists for his scientific “errors,” but by theologians for his very real heresies (and they were real enough by 17th Century standards).

Well, do you suppose the general public supported Galileo? Of course not. There was no outcry in his favor. There was no great passion in favor of the Earth going round the Sun. There were no “sun-is-center” movements denouncing the authorities and accusing them of a conspiracy to hide the truth. If Galileo had been burned at the stake, as Giordano Bruno had been a generation earlier, the action would probably have proved popular with those parts of the public that took the pains to notice it in the first place.

Or consider the most astonishing case of scientific heresy since Galileo — the matter of Charles Robert Darwin. Darwin collected the evidence in favor of the evolution of species by natural selection, and did it carefully and painstakingly over the decades, then published a meticulously reasoned book that established the fact of evolution to the point where no rational biologist can deny it* even though there are arguments over the details of the mechanism.

Well, then, do you suppose the general public came to the support of Darwin and his dramatic theory? They certainly knew about it. He made as much of a splash in his day as Velikovsky did a century later. It was certainly dramatic — imagine species developing by sheer random mutation and selection, and human beings developing from ape-like creatures. Nothing any science fiction writer ever dreamed up was as shatteringly astonishing as that to people who from earliest childhood had taken it for established and absolute truth that God had created all the species ready-made in the space of a few days and that man in particular was created in the divine image.

Do you suppose the general public supported Darwin and waxed enthusiastic about him and made him rich and renowned and denounced

* Please don't write to tell me that there are creationists who call themselves biologists. Anyone can call himself a biologist.

the scientific establishment for persecuting him? You know they didn't. What support Darwin got was from scientists. (The support any rational scientific heretic gets is from scientists, though usually from only a minority of them at first.)

In fact, not only was the general public against Darwin then, they are against Darwin now. It is my suspicion that if a vote were taken in the United States right now on the question of whether man was created all at once out of the dirt, or through the subtle mechanisms of mutation and natural selection over millions of years, there would be a large majority who would vote for the dirt.

There are other cases, less famous, where the general public didn't join the persecutors only because they never heard there was an argument.

In the 1830s, the greatest chemist alive was the Swede, Jons Jakob Berzelius. Berzelius had a theory of the structure of organic compounds which was based on the evidence available at that time. The French chemist, August Laurent, collected additional evidence that showed that Berzelius's theory was inadequate. He himself suggested an alternate theory of his own which was more nearly correct and which, in its essentials, is still in force now.

Berzelius, who was in his old age and very conservative, was unable to accept the new theory. He retaliated furiously, and none of the established chemists of the day had the nerve to stand up against the great Swede.

Laurent stuck to his guns and continued to accumulate evidence. For this he was rewarded by being barred from the more famous laboratories and being forced to remain in the provinces. He is supposed to have contracted tuberculosis as a result of working in poorly heated laboratories, and he died in 1853 at the age of 46.

With both Laurent and Berzelius dead, the new theory began to gain ground. In fact, one French chemist who had originally supported Laurent but had backed away in the face of Berzelius's displeasure now accepted the new theory again and actually tried to make it appear that it was *his* theory. (Scientists are human, too.)

That's not even a record for sadness. Robert Mayer, for his championship of the law of conservation of energy, was driven to madness. Ludwig Boltzmann, for his work on the kinetic theory of gases, was driven to suicide. The work of both is now accepted and praised beyond measure.

But what did the public have to do with all these cases? Why, nothing. They never heard of them. They never cared. It didn't touch any of their great concerns. In fact, if I wanted to be completely cynical, I would say

that the heretics were in this case right and that the public, somehow sensing this, yawned.

This sort of thing goes on in the 20th Century, too. In 1912, a German geologist, Alfred Lothar Wegener, presented to the world his views on continental drift. He thought the continents all formed a single lump of land to begin with, and that this lump, "Pangaea," had split up, and that the various portions had drifted apart. He suggested that the land floated on the soft, semi-solid underlying rock, and that the continental pieces drifted apart as they floated.

Unfortunately, the evidence seemed to suggest that the underlying rock was far too stiff for continents to drift through, and Wegener's notions were dismissed and even hooted at. For half a century, the few people who supported Wegener's notions had difficulty in getting academic appointments.

Then after World War II, new techniques of exploration of the sea-bottom uncovered the global rift, the phenomenon of sea-floor spreading, the existence of crustal plates, and it became obvious that the Earth's crust was a group of large pieces that were constantly on the move and that the continents were carried with the pieces. Continental drift, or "plate tectonics," as it is more properly called, became the cornerstone of geology.

I personally witnessed this turnabout. In the first two editions of my **GUIDE TO SCIENCE**, I mentioned continental drift, but dismissed it haughtily in a paragraph. In the third edition, I devoted several pages to it and admitted having been wrong to dismiss it so readily. (This is no disgrace, actually. If you follow the evidence you *must* change as additional evidence arrives and invalidates earlier conclusions. It is those who support ideas for emotional reasons only who can't change. Additional evidence has no effect on emotion.)

If Wegener had not been a true scientist, he could have made himself famous and wealthy. All he had to do was to take the concept of continental drift and bring it down to Earth by having it explain the miracles of the Bible. The splitting of Pangaea might have been the cause, or the result, of Noah's Flood. The formation of the Great African Rift might have drowned Sodom. The Israelites crossed the Red Sea because it was only half a mile wide in those days. If he had said all that, the book would have been eaten up and he could have retired on his royalties.

In fact, if any reader wants to do this *now*, he can still get rich. Anyone pointing out this article as the inspirer of the book will be disregarded by

the mass of true-believers, I assure you.

So here's a new version of Asimov's Corollary, which you can use as your guide in deciding what to believe and what to dismiss:

If a scientific heresy is ignored or denounced by the general public, there is a chance it may be right. If a scientific heresy is emotionally supported by the general public, it is almost certainly wrong.

You'll notice that in my two versions of Asimov's Corollary I was careful to hedge a bit. In the first, I say that scientists are "probably right." In the second, I say that the public is "almost certainly" wrong. I am not absolute. I hint at exceptions.

Alas, not only are people human, not only are scientists human, but I'm human, too. I want the Universe to be as I want it to be, and that means completely logical. I want silly, emotional judgements to be *always* wrong.

Unfortunately, I can't have the Universe the way I want it, and one of the things that makes me a rational being is that I know this.

Somewhere in history, there are bound to be cases in which science said "No" and the general public, for utterly emotional reasons, said "Yes" and in which it was the general public that was right. I thought about it and came up with an example in half a minute.

In 1798, the English physician, Edward Jenner, guided by old wives' tales based on the kind of anecdotal evidence I despise, tested to see whether the mild disease of cowpox did indeed confer immunity upon the deadly and dreaded disease of smallpox. (He wasn't content with the anecdotal evidence, you understand; he *experimented*.) Jenner found the old wives were correct and he established the technique of vaccination.

The medical establishment of the day reacted to the new technique with the greatest suspicion. Had it been left to them, the technique might well have been buried.

However, popular acceptance of vaccination was immediate and overwhelming. The technique spread to all parts of Europe. The British royal family was vaccinated; the British Parliament voted Jenner ten thousand pounds. In fact, Jenner was given semi-divine status.

There's no problem in seeing why. Smallpox was an unbelievably frightening disease, for where it did not kill it permanently disfigured. The general public therefore was almost hysterical with desire for the truth of the suggestion that the disease could be avoided by the mere prick of a needle.

And in this case, the public was right! The Universe *was* as they wanted it to be. In eighteen months after the introduction of vaccination, for instance, the number of deaths from smallpox in England was reduced to one-third of what it had been.

So there are indeed exceptions. The popular fancy is sometimes right.

But not often, and I must warn you that I lose no sleep over the possibility that any of the popular enthusiasms of today are liable to turn out to be scientifically correct. Not an hour of sleep do I lose; not a minute.

ATOMIC TERMS

by Joseph C. Stacey

Anagrammed below are 15 atomic terms. All are composed of but a single word. Can you rearrange the letters and come up with the correct one in each instance?

1. A sun belt
2. O, I'm Ruth!
3. In motor
4. O, Tom's corn!
5. Creator
6. One turn
7. I aid no rat
8. Si, pronto!
9. O, it's Poe!
10. Rum, Ida?
11. Crater
12. Do more, rat!
13. Outer den
14. Race, Cleo, Art?
15. Not green

Answers on page 160

The second and concluding part of Fritz Leiber's new novel about supernatural doings in the streets of San Francisco, in which writer Franz Westen moves toward a confrontation with the elusive paramental entities that he has so far seen as only a "pale brown thing." If you missed part one, the author's synopsis will bring you quickly up to date [or send us \$1.00, and we'll rush you a copy of the January issue].

The Pale Brown Thing

(2nd of 2 parts)

by FRITZ LEIBER

Synopsis of Part I: Franz Westen, a San Francisco writer of supernatural horror stories, became an alcoholic when his wife Daisy died four years ago of brain cancer, but he has been sober for one year. He lives in Room 607 in an old downtown apartment building, alone except for his "Scholar's Mistress," his joking name for the scatter of books beside him on his bed, the books he sleeps with. His neighbors are Cal, a young harpsichordist preparing for a concert, with whom he is cautiously in love; Saul, a male nurse at a mental hospital; and Gunnar, a computer scientist. Dorotea Luque, a Peruvian, is the friendly apartment manager, and her brother Fernando the janitor, lacking English but an expert chessplayer.

Franz becomes fascinated by the theories of an old occultist, Thibaut de Castries, dead fifty years, who believed that big cities and especially their high buildings are poisoning the world by breeding "paranatural" beings he calls "paramentals" and who hints that he has invented a magic to control such forces. Franz learned about de Castries from the latter's rare book *Megapolisomancy: A New Science of Cities*, which he purchased while drunk in a

secondhand bookstore in the Haight-Ashbury — and with it a handwritten journal of the fantasy writer Clark Ashton Smith recounting a series of interviews with de Castries in the 1920's at a place he refers to as "607 Rhodes" — interviews Smith broke off because he became afraid of the old man and his eerie theories.

Coincidentally, Franz is intrigued by a barren, craggy hill, Corona Heights, which, overshadowed by Frisco's new 1000-foot TV tower, he can see two miles away from his apartment window. When his binoculars reveal a figure in pale-brown robes lurking at the summit, he journeys there to investigate. Climbing the steep and lonely hill, he finds no one, but turning his binoculars back on the central city and locating the window of his apartment, he sees by bright sunlight the same figure in pale-brown robes waving to him!

Going home puzzled and apprehensive, he finds no evidence of an intruder. He tells his friends about his experience. Next day (Cal's concert is scheduled for the evening), he investigates at City Hall the history of their apartment building and discovers that it was built fifty years ago "for use

as a hotel." He steals from the public library a 1927 city directory, which he plans to consult later at home, because he is in a hurry to get out to Corona Heights and check again on his apartment building while the sun is on it.

Getting from the hilltop a rather more frightening glimpse of the same robed figure or "paramental entity" peering from his window, he drops his binoculars, smashing them, and seeks refuge in the nearby home of Jaime Donaldus Byers, a bland and sybaritic bisexual poet who is an authority on Smith (and on de Castries, it turns out) to whom he has previously shown Smith's journal, which he has again brought with him. Byers maintains that art, fantasy, and reality are all one and lives in tasteful luxury with a female Chinese companion (who has just gone out) Fa Lo Suee ("the daughter of Fu Manchu," another joking name).

Byers takes Franz's story of his scare very seriously and proceeds to tell Franz what he knows about de Castries from his studies, his chief informants having been Klaas and Ricker, companions of the occultist's old age.

Thibaut de Castries arrived in San Francisco in 1900 from parts unknown, but New England, Paris, Tibet, and Egypt were all suspected, in the last one of which he was reputed to have studied the Great Pyramid. A glamorous mystery figure, he was taken up by Jack London, Ambrose Bierce, George Sterling and their wild crowd, and with whom he founded the Hermetic Order of the Onyx Dusk, but when he revealed to them that the object of the

Order would be violent revolution and the destruction of tall buildings by magical means, they refused their help and dropped him. Deeply embittered, he tried to blackmail them and later to do them to death by various means. He was generally unsuccessful in this, although the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 and the suicides and disappearances of several members of the order are indisputable facts. De Castries is supposed to have kept a book in code, called the Grand Cipher or Fifty Book.

When Byers reaches in his narrative the period of the Smith-de Castries interviews, Franz and Byers consult the journal and the latter discovers, hidden between two lightly gummed-together pages, the following curse, penned in black ink by the occultist:

A CURSE upon Master Clark Ashton Smith and all his heirs, who thought to pick my brain and slip away, false fleeting agent of my old enemies. Upon him the Long Death, the paramental agony! when he strays back as all men do. The fulcrum (O) and the Cipher (A) shall be here, at his *beloved* 607 Rhodes. I'll be at rest in my appointed spot (1) under the Bishop's-Seat, the heaviest ashes that he ever felt. Then when the weights are on at Sutro Mount (4) and Monkey Clay (5) [(4) + (1) = (5)] *BE his Life Squeezed Away*. Committed to Cipher in my 50-Book (A). Go out, my little book (B), into the world, and lie in wait in stalls and lurk on shelves for the unwary purchaser. Go out, my little book, and break some necks!

TdC



Part II

As he finished reading it, Franz's mind was whirling with so many names of places and things both familiar and strange that he had to prod himself to remind himself to check visually the windows and doors and corners of Byers' gorgeous living room, now filling with shadows. That business about "when the weights are on," he couldn't imagine what it meant, but taken together with "heaviest ashes" it made him think of the old man pressed to death with heavy stones on a plank on his chest for refusing to testify at the Salem witchcraft trial of 1692, as if a confession could be forced out like a last breath.

"Monkey Clay," Byers muttered puzzledly. "Ape of clay? Poor suffering Man, molded of dust?"

Franz shook his head. And in the midst of all, he thought, that damnably puzzling 607 Rhodes! Which kept turning up again and again, and had in a way touched all this off.

And to think he'd had this book for years and not spotted the secret. It made a person suspect and distrust all things closest to him, his most familiar possessions. What might not be hidden inside the lining of your clothes, or in your right-hand trousers' pocket (or for a woman, in her handbag or bra), or in the cake of soap with which

you washed (which might have a razor blade inside).

Also to think that he was looking at last at de Castries' own handwriting, so neatly drawn and yet so crabbed for all that.

One detail puzzled him differently. "Donaldus," he said, "how would de Castries ever have got hold of Smith's journal?"

Byers let out a long, alcohol-laden sigh, massaged his face with his hands (Franz clutched the journal to keep it from falling) and said, "Oh, that. Klaas and Ricker both told me that de Castries was quite worried and hurt when Clark went back to Auburn (it turned out) without warning after visiting the old man every day for a month or so. De Castries was so bothered, they said, that he went over to Clark's cheap rooming house and convinced them he was Clark's uncle, so that they gave him some things Clark had left behind when he'd checked out in a great tearing hurry the day before. 'I'll keep them for little Clark,' he told Klaas and Ricker, and then later (after they'd heard from Clark) he added, 'I've shipped him back his things.' They never suspected that the old man ever entertained any hard feelings about Clark."

Franz nodded. "But then how did the journal (now with the curse in it) get from de Castries to wherever I bought it?"

Byers said wearily, "Who knows? The curse, though, does remind me of another side of de Castries' character I haven't mentioned: his fondness for rather cruel practical jokes. Despite his morbid fear of electricity, he had a chair Ricker helped rig for him to give the sitter an electric shock through the cushion that he kept for salesmen and salesladies, children, and other stray visitors. He nearly got into police trouble through that too. Some young lady looking for typing work got her bottom burned," Byers finished and stood up, leaving the journal in Franz's hands, and went back to his place. Franz looked at him questioningly, holding out the journal toward him a little, but his host said, pouring himself more brandy, "No, you keep it. It's yours. After all, you were — are — the purchaser. Only, for Heaven's sake, take better care of it! It's a very rare item."

"But what do you think of it, Donaldus?" Franz asked.

The other shrugged as he began to sip. "A shivery document indeed," he said, smiling at Franz as if he were very glad the latter had it. "And it really did lie in wait in stalls and lurk on shelves for many years, apparently. Franz, don't you recall *anything* about where you bought it?"

"I've tried and tried," Franz said tormentedly. "The place was

in the Haight, I'm fairly sure of that. Called ... the In Group? The Black Spot? The Black Dog? The Grey Cockatoo? No, none of those, and I've tried hundreds of names. I think that 'black' was in it, but I believe the proprietor was a white man. And there was a little girl, maybe his daughter, helping him. Not so little, really — she was into puberty, I seem to recall, and well aware of it. Pushing herself at me — all this is very vague. I also seem to recall (I was drunk of course) being attracted to her," he confessed somewhat ashamedly.

"My dear Franz, aren't we all?" Byers observed. "The little darlings, barely kissed by sex, but don't they know it! Who can resist? Do you recall what you paid for the books?"

"Something pretty high, I think. But now I'm beginning to guess and imagine."

"You could search through the Haight, street by street, of course."

"I suppose I could, if it's still there and hasn't changed its name. Why don't you get on with your story, Donaldus?"

"Very well. There's not much more of it. You know, Franz, there's one indication that that ... er ... curse isn't particularly efficacious. Clark lived a long and productive life, thirty-three more years. Reassuring, don't you think?"

"He didn't stray back to San Francisco," Franz said shortly. "At least not very often."

"That's true. Well, after Clark left, de Castries remained ... just a lonely and gloomy old man. He once told George Ricker at about this time a very unromantic story of his past: that he was French Canadian and had grown up in northern Vermont, his father by turns a small-town printer and a farmer, always a failure, and he a lonely and unhappy child. It has the ring of truth, don't you think? Well, anyhow, now he'd had his last fling (with Clark) at playing the omnipotent sinister sorcerer, and it had turned out as bitterly as it had the first time in *fin de siecle* San Francisco (if that was the first). Gloomy and lonely. He only had one other literary acquaintance at that time, or friend of any sort, for that matter. Klaas and Ricker both vouch for it. Dashiell Hammett, who was living in San Francisco in an apartment at Post and Hyde, and writing *The Maltese Falcon*. Those bookstore names you were trying out reminded me of it — the Black Dog and a cockatoo. You see, the fabulously jeweled gold falcon painted black (and finally proven a fake) is sometimes called the Black Bird in Hammett's detective story. He and de Castries talked a lot about black treasures, Klass and Ricker told me. And

about the historical background of Hammett's book — the Knights Hospitalers (later of Malta) who created the falcon and how they'd once been the Knights of Rhodes —"

"Rhodes turning up again!" Franz interjected. "That damn 607 Rhodes!"

"Yes," Byers agreed. "First Tiberius, then the Hospitalers. They held the island for two hundred years and were finally driven out of it by the sultan Mohammed II in 1522. But about the Black Bird — you'll recall what I told you of de Castries' *pietra dura* ring of mosaicked black semiprecious stuff depicting a black bird? Klass claims it was the inspiration for *The Maltese Falcon*! One needn't go that far, of course, but just the same it's all very odd indeed, don't you think? De Castries and Hammett. The black magician and the tough detective."

"Not so odd as all that when you think about it," Franz countered, his eyes on one of their roving trips again. "Besides being one of America's few great novelists, Hammett was a rather lonely and taciturn man himself, with an almost fabulous integrity. He elected to serve a sentence in a federal prison rather than betray a trust. And he enlisted in World War II when he didn't have to and served it out in the cold Aleutians and finally

toughed out a long last illness. No, he'd have been interested in a queer old duck like de Castries and showed a hard, unsentimental compassion toward his loneliness and bitterness and failures. Go on, Donaldus."

"There's really nothing more," the latter said, but his eyes were flashing. "De Castries died of a coronary occlusion in 1929 after two weeks in the City Hospital. It happened in the summertime — I remember Klaas saying the old man didn't even live to see the stock market crash and the beginnings of the Great Depression, 'which would have been a comfort to him because it would have confirmed his theories that because of the self-abuse of mega-cities, the world was going to hell in a hand basket.'

"So that was that. De Castries was cremated, as he'd wished, which took his last cash. Ricker and Klaas split his few possessions. There were of course no relatives."

"I'm glad of that," Franz said. "I mean, that he was cremated. Oh, I know he died — had to be dead after all these years — but just the same, along with all the rest today, I've had this picture of de Castries, a very old man, but wiry and somehow very fast, still slipping around San Francisco. Hearing that he not only died in a hospital but was cremated makes his death more final."

"In a way," Byers agreed, giving him an odd look. "Klaas had the ashes sitting just inside his front door for a while in a cheap canister the crematory had furnished, until he and Ricker figured out what to do with them. They finally decided to follow de Castries' wish there too, although it meant an illegal burial and doing it all secretly at night. Ricker carried a post-digger packaged in newspaper, and Klaas a small spade, similarly wrapped.

"There were two other persons in the funeral party. Dashiell Hammett — he decided a question for them, as it happened. They'd been arguing as to whether de Castries' black ring (Klaas had it) should be buried with the ashes, and so they put it up to Hammett, and he said, 'Of course.'"

"That figures," Franz said, nodding. "But how very strange."

"Yes, wasn't it?" Byers agreed. "The fourth person — he even carried the ashes — was Clark. I thought that would surprise you. They'd got in touch with him in Auburn and he'd come back just for that night. It shows, come to think of it, that Clark couldn't have known about the curse — or does it? Anyhow, the little burial detail set forth from Klaas' place just after dark. It was a clear night and the moon was gibbous, a few days before full — which was a good thing, as they had some climbing to

do where there were no street lights."

Byers looked at Franz with a sort of relish and finished rapidly. "The burial went off without a hitch, though they needed the post-digger — the ground was hard. The only thing lacking was the TV tower, that fantastic cross between a dressmaker's dummy and a Burmese pagoda in the feast of red lanterns, to lean down through the night and give a cryptic blessing. The spot was just below a natural rock seat that de Castries had called the Bishop's Seat after the one in Poe's *Gold Bug* story, and just at the base of the big rock outcropping that is the summit of Corona Heights. Oh, incidentally — another of his whims they gratified — he was burned wearing a bathrobe he'd worn to tatters — a pale old brown one with a cowl."

Franz's eyes, engaged in one of their roving all-inspections, got the command to check the glooms and shadows not only for a pale, blank, triangular face with restless snout, but also for the thin, hawkish, ghostly one, tormented and tormenting, murder-bent, of a hyper-active old man looking like something out of Dore's illustrations to Dante's *Inferno*. Since he'd never seen a photograph of de Castries, if any existed, that would have to do.

His mind was busy assimilating the thought that Corona Heights

was literally impregnated with Thibaut de Castries. That both yesterday and today he had occupied for rather long periods of time what must almost certainly be the Bishop's Seat of the curse, while only a few yards below in the hard ground were the essential dusts (salts?) and the black ring. How did that go in the cipher in Poe's tale? "Take a good glass in the Bishop's Seat ..." His glasses were broken, but then he hardly needed them for this short-range work. Which were worse, ghosts or paramentals? — or were they, conceivably, the same? When one was simply on watch for the approach of both or either, that was a rather academic question, no matter how many interesting problems it posed about different levels of reality. Somewhere, deep down, he was aware of being angry, or perhaps only argumentative.

"Turn on some lights, Donaldus," he said in a flat voice.

"I must say, you're taking it very coolly," the other said in slightly aggrieved, slightly awed tones.

"What do you expect me to do, panic? Run out in the street and get shot? — or crushed by falling walls? or cut by flying glass? I suppose, Donaldus, that you delayed revealing the exact location of de Castries' grave so that it would have a greater dramatic impact, and so be truer, in line with your theory of

the identity of reality and art?"

"Exactly! You *do* understand, and I *did* tell you there would be a ghost and how appropriately the astrological graffiti served as Thibaut's epitaph, or tomb decor. But isn't it all so very *amazing*, Franz? To think that when you first looked from your window at Corona Heights, Thibaut de Castries' mortal remains unknown to you —"

"Turn on some lights," Franz repeated. "What I find amazing, Donaldus, is that you've known about paramental entities for many years, and about the highly sinister activities of de Castries and the suggestive circumstances of his burial, and yet take no more precautions against them than you do. You're like a soldier dancing the light fantastic in No Man's Land. Always remembering that I, or you, or both of us may at this moment be totally insane. Of course, you only learned about the curse just now, if I can trust you. And you did bolt the door after I came in. Turn on some lights!"

Byers complied at last. A dull gold refulgence streamed from the large globular shade suspended above them. He moved to the front hall, somewhat reluctantly, it appeared, and flicked a switch, then to the back of the living room, where he did the same and then busied himself opening another bottle of brandy. The windows

became dark rectangles netted with gold. Full night had fallen. But at least the shadows inside had been vanished.

All this while he was saying in a voice that had grown rather listless and dispirited now that his tale had been told, "Of course you can trust me, Franz. It was out of consideration for your own safety that I didn't tell you about de Castries. Until today, when it became clear you were into the business, like it or not. I don't go babbling about it all, believe me. If I've learned one thing over the years, it's that it's a mercy *not* to tell anyone about the darker side of de Castries and his theories. That's why I've never even *considered* publishing a monograph about the man. What other reason could I have for that? — such a book would be brilliant. Fa Lo Suee knows all — one can't hide anything from a serious lover — but she has a very strong mind, as I've suggested. In fact, after you called this morning, I suggested to her as she was going out that if she had some spare time she have another look for the bookstore where you bought the journal — she has a talent for such problems. She smiled and said that, as it happened, she'd been planning to do just that."

"Donaldus," Franz said sharply, "you've been a lot deeper and more steadily into this all along

than you've told me — and your girlfriend too, apparently."

"Companion," Byers corrected. "Or, if you will, lover. Yes, that's right — it's been one of my chief secondary concerns (primary now) for quite a few years. But what was I saying? Oh, yes, that Fa Lo Suee knows all. So did a couple of her predecessors — a famous interior decorator and a tennis star who was also an actor. Clark, Klaas, and Ricker knew — they were my source — but they're all dead. So you see I do try to shield others — and myself up to a point. I regard paramental entities as very real and present dangers, about midway in nature between the atomic bomb and the archetypes of the collective unconscious, which include several highly dangerous characters, as you know. Or between a Charles Manson or a Zodiac killer and kappa phenomena as defined by Meleta Denning in *Gnostica*. Or between muggers and elementals, or hepatitis viruses and incubi. They're all of them things any sane man is on guard against.

"But mark this, Franz," he emphasized, pouring out brandy, "despite all my previous knowledge, so much more extensive and of such longer standing than your own, I've never actually *seen* a paramental entity. You have the advantage of me there. And it seems to be *quite* an advantage."

And he looked at Franz with a mixture of avidity and dread.

Franz stood up. "Perhaps it is," he said shortly, "at least in making a person stay on guard. You say you're trying to protect yourself, but you don't act that way. Right now — excuse me, Donaldus — you're getting so drunk that you'd be helpless if a paramental entity —"

The other's eyebrows went up. "You think you could defend yourself against them, resist them, fight them, destroy them?" he asked incredulously, his voice strengthening. "Can you stop an atomic missile headed for San Francisco at this moment through the ionosphere? Can you command the germs of cholera? Can you abolish your Anima or your Shadow? Can you say to the poltergeist 'Don't knock?' You can't stand guard twenty-four hours a day for months, for years. Believe me, I know. A soldier crouched in a dugout can't try to figure out if the next shell will be a direct hit or not. He'd go crazy if he tried. No, Franz, all you can do is lock the doors and windows, turn on all the lights, and hope they pass you by. And try to forget them. Eat, drink, and be merry. Recreate yourself. Here, have a drink."

He came toward Franz carrying in each hand a glass half full of brandy.

"No, thank you," Franz said

harshly, jamming the journal into his coat pocket, to Byers' fleeting distress. Then he picked up the tinkling binoculars and jammed them in the other side pocket, thinking in a flash of the binoculars in James' ghost story "A View from a Hill" that had been magicked to see the past by being filled with a black fluid from boiled bones that had oozed out nastily when they were broken. Could his own binoculars have been somehow doctored or gimmicked so that they saw things that weren't there? A wildly far-fetched notion, and anyhow his own binoculars were broken too.

"I'm sorry, Donaldus, but I've got to go," he said, heading for the hall. He knew that if he stayed he *would* take a drink, starting the old cycle, and the idea of becoming unconscious *and incapable of being roused* was very repellent.

Byers hurried after him. His haste and his gyrations to keep the brandy from spilling would have been comic under other circumstances and if he hadn't been saying in a horrified, plaintive, pleading voice: "You can't go out, it's dark. You can't go out with that old devil or his paramental slipping around. Here, have a drink and stay the night. At least stay for the party. If you're going to stand on guard, you're going to need some rest and recreation. I'm sure you'll

find an agreeable and pleasing partner — they'll all be swingers, but intelligent. And if you're afraid of liquor dulling your mind, I've some cocaine, the purest crystal." He drained one glass and set it down on the hall table. "Look, Franz, I'm frightened too — and you've been pale ever since I told you where the old devil's dust is laid. Stay for the party. And have just one drink — enough to relax a little. In the end there's no other way, believe me. You'd just get too tired, trying to watch forever." He swayed a little, wheedling, smiling his pleasantest.

A weight of weariness descended on Franz. He reached toward the glass, but just as he touched it he jerked his fingers away as if they'd been burned.

"Shh," he cautioned as Byers started to speak and he warningly gripped him by the elbow.

In the silence they heard a tiny, faintly grating, sliding metallic sound ending in a soft snap, as of a key being rotated in a lock. Their eyes went to the front door. They saw the brass inner knob revolve.

"It's Fa Lo Suee," Byers said. "I'll have to unbolt the door." He moved to do so.

"Wait!" Franz whispered urgently. "Listen!"

They heard a steady scratching sound that didn't end, as if some

intelligent beast were drawing a horny claw round and round on the other side of the painted wood. There rose unbidden in Franz's imagination the paralyzing image of a large black panther crouched close against the other side of the gold-traced white opacity, a green-eyed, gleamingly black panther that was beginning to metamorphose into something more terrible.

"Up to her tricks," Byers muttered and drew the bolt before Franz could move to hinder him.

The door pressed halfway open, and around it came two pale-gray, triangular flat feline faces that glittered at the edges and were screeching "Aiii-eee!" it sounded.

Both men recoiled, Franz flinching aside with eyes involuntarily slitted from two pale-gray gleaming shapes, a taller and a slenderer one, that whirled past him as they shot menacingly at Byers, who was bent half double in his retreat, one arm thrown shielding across his eyes, the other across his groin, while the gleaming wine glass and the small sheet of amber fluid it had contained still sailed through the air from the point where his hand had abandoned them.

Incongruously, Franz's mind registered the odors of brandy, burnt hemp, and a spicy perfume.

The gray shapes converged on Byers, clutching at his groin, and as

he gasped and gabbled inarticulately, weakly trying to fend them off, the taller was saying in a husky contralto voice with great enjoyment, "In China, Mr. Nayland Smith, we have ways to make men talk."

Then the brandy was on the pale green wallpaper, the unbroken wine glass on the golden-brown carpet, and the stoned, handsome Chinese woman and equally mind-blown urchin-faced girl had snatched off their gray cat-masks, though laughing wildly and continuing to grope and tickle Byers vigorously; and Franz realized they had both been screeching "Jaime," his host's first name, at the top of their voices.

His extreme fear had left Franz, but not its paralysis. The latter extended to his vocal cords, so that from the moment of the strange eruption of the two gray-clad females to the moment when he left the house on Beaver Street he never spoke a word but only stood beside the dark rectangle of the open door and observed the busy tableau farther down the hall with a rather cold detachment.

Fa Lo Suee had a spare, somewhat angular figure, a flat face with strong bony structure, dark eyes that were paradoxically both bright and dull with marijuana (and whatever) and straight, dull black hair. Her dark red lips were thin. She

wore silver-gray stockings and gloves and a closely fitting dress (of ribbed silver-gray silk) of the Chinese sort that always looks modern. Her left hand threatened Byers in his midst, her right lay loosely low around the slender waist of her companion.

The latter was a head shorter, almost but not quite skinny, and had sexy little breasts. Her face was actually catlike: receding chin, pouty lips, a snub nose, protuberant blue eyes and low forehead, from which straight blonde hair fell to one side. She looked about seventeen, bratty and worldly-wise. She plinked a note in Franz's memory. She wore a pale-gray leotard, silver-gray gloves, and a gray cloak of some light material that now hung to one side like her hair. Both of her hands mischievously groped Byers. She had a pink ear and a vicious giggle.

The two gray cat-masks, cast on the hall table now, were edged with silver sequins and had a few stiff whiskers, but they retained the nasty triangular snouty appearance which had been so unnerving coming around the door.

Donaldus (or Jaime) spoke no really intelligible word himself during this period before Franz's departure, except perhaps "Don't!" but he gasped and squealed and babbled a lot, with breathless little laughs thrown in. He

stayed bent half double and twisting from side to side, his hands constantly but rather ineffectually fending off the clutching ones. His pale violet dressing gown, unbelted, swished as he twisted.

It was the women who did all the talking and at first only Fa Lo Suee. "We really scared you, didn't we?" she said rapidly. "Jaime scares easily, Shirl, especially when he's drunk. That was my key scratching the door. Go on, Shirl, give it to him!" Then resuming her Fu Manchu voice, "What have you and Dr. Petrie there been up to? In Honan, Mr. Nayland Smith, We have an infallible Chinese test for homophilia. Or is it possible you're AC-DC? We have the ancient wisdom of the East, all the dark lore that Mao Tse-tung's forgotten. Combined with western science, it's devastating. (That's it, girl, hurt him!) Remember my thugs and dacoits, Mr. Smith, my golden scorpions and red six-inch centipedes, my black spiders with diamond eyes that wait in the dark, then leap! How would you like one of those dropped down your pants? Repeat, what have you and Dr. Petrie been doing? Be careful what you say. My assistant, Miss Shirley Soames (keep it up, Shirl!), has a rat-trap memory. No lie will go unnoticed."

Franz, frozen, felt rather as if he were watching crayfish and sea

anemones scuttling and grasping, fronds questing, pincers and flower-mouths opening and closing, in a rock pool. The endless play of life.

"Oh, by the bye, Jaime, I've solved the problem of the Smith journal," Fa Lo Suee said in a bright casual voice while her own hands became more active. "This is Shirl Soames, Jaime (you're getting to him, girl!), who for years and years has been her father's assistant at the Gray's Inn bookstore in the Haight. And she remembers the whole transaction, although it was four years ago, because she has a *rat-trap* memory."

The name "Gray's Inn" lit up like neon in Franz's mind. How had he kept missing it?

"Oh, traps distress you, do they, Nayland Smith?" Fa Lo Suee went on. "They're cruel to animals, are they? Western sentimentality! I will have you know, for your information, that Shirl Soames here can *bite*, as well as nip exquisitely."

As she was saying that, she was sliding her silk-gloved right hand down the girl's rump and inward, until the tip of her middle finger appeared to be resting on the spot midway between the outer orifices of the reproductive and digestive systems. The girl appreciatively jogged her hips from side to side through a very short arc.

Franz took coldly clinical note of those actions and of the inward

fact that under other circumstances it would have been an exciting gesture, making him want to do so himself to Shirley Soames, and so be done by. But why her in particular? Memories stirred.

Fa Lo Suee noticed Franz and turned her head. Giving him a very civilized, glassy-eyed smile, she said politely, "Ah, you must be Franz Westen, the writer, who phoned Jaime this morning. So you as well as he will be interested in what Shirley has to say.

"Shirl, leave off excruciating Jaime. He's had enough punishment. Is this the gentleman?" And without removing her hand she gently swung the girl around until she faced Franz.

Behind them Byers, still bent over, was taking deep breaths mixed with dying chuckles as he began to recover from the working over he'd been given.

With amphetamine-bright eyes the girl looked Franz up and down. While he was realizing that he knew that feline, foxy little face (face of a cat, presently licking cream), though on a body skinnier still and another head shorter.

"That's him, all right," she said in a rapid, sharp voice that still had something of a brat's "yah! yah!" in it. "Correct, mister? Four years ago you bought two old books tied together out of a lot that had been around for years that my father'd

bought that'd belonged to a George Ricker. You were squiffed, really skew-iffed! You paid \$25. I thought you thought you were paying for a chance to feel me up. Were you? So many of the older men wanted to. I was daddy's star attraction, and didn't he know it! But I'd already found out girls were nicer."

All this while she'd continued to jog her little hips lasciviously, leaning back a little, and now she slipped her own right hand behind her, presumably to rest it on Fa Lo Suee's.

Franz looked at Shirley Soames and at the two others, and he knew that all that she had said was true, and he also knew that this was how Jaime Donaldus Byers escaped from his fears (and Fa Lo Suee from hers?). And without a word or any change in his rather stupid expression he turned and walked out the open door.

He had a sharp pang — "I am abandoning Donaldus!" — and a fleeting thought — "Would Fa Lo Suee immortalize the exquisite moment in slim silver, perhaps titling it 'The Loving Goose'?" — but neither made him pause or reconsider. As he started down the steps, light from the doorway spilling around him, his eyes were already systematically checking the darkness ahead for hostile presences — each corner, each yawning areaway, each shadowy rooftop,

each coign of vantage. As he reached the street, the soft light around him vanished as the door behind him was silently shut. That relieved him — it made him less of a target in the full onyx dusk that had now closed once more on San Francisco.

As he moved cautiously down Beaver Street, his eyes checking the glooms between the rather few lights, his mind thought of how de Castries had ceased to be a mere parochial devil haunting the lonely hump of Corona Heights (and Franz's own room at 811 Geary?), but a ubiquitous demon, ghost, or paramental inhabiting the whole city with its scattered humping hills. For that matter, to keep it all materialistic, were not some of the atoms shed from de Castries' body during his life and during his burial forty years ago around Franz here at this very moment and in the very air that he was discretely sniffing in? — atoms being so vastly tiny and infinity-numerous. As were the atoms too of Francis Drake (sailing past San Francisco Bay-to-be in the *Golden Hind*) and of Shakespeare and Socrates and Solomon (and of Dashiell Hammett and Clark Ashton Smith). And for that matter, too, had not the atoms that were to become Thibaut de Castries been circulating around the world before the pyramids were built? — slowly converging on the spot (in Ver-

mont? in France?) where the old devil would be born? And before that, had not those Thibaut atoms been swiftly vectoring from the violent birthplace of the universe to the space-time spot where earth would be born and all its weird Pandora woes?

Blocks off, a siren yelped. Nearby, a dark cat darted into a black slit between walls set too close for human passage. It made Franz think of how big buildings had been threatening to crush man ever since the first mega-city had been built. Really Saul's crazy (?) Mrs. Willis wasn't so far off the track, nor Lovecraft (and Smith?) with his fascinated dread of vast rooms with ceilings that were indoor skies and far walls that were horizons, in buildings vaster still. San Francisco was carbunched with the latter, and each month new ones grew. Were the signs of the universe written into them? Whose wandering atoms didn't they hold? And were paramentals their personification or their vermin or their natural predators? In any case, it all transpired as logically and ineluctably as the rice-paper journal had passed from Smith, who wrote in purple ink, to de Castries, who added a deadly, secret black, to Ricker, who was a locksmith not a bibliophile, to Soames, who had a precociously sexy daughter, to Westen, who was susceptible to

weird and sexy things.

A dark-blue taxi coasting slowly and silently downhill ghosted by Franz and drew up at the opposite curb.

No wonder Donaldus had wanted Franz to keep the journal and its new-found curse! Byers was an old campaigner against paramentals, with his defense in depth of locks and lights, and liquor, drugs, and sex, and outre sex — Fa Lo Suee had brought Shirley Soames for him as well as for herself; the humorously hostile groping had been to cheer him. Very resourceful, truly. A person had to sleep. Maybe he'd learn, Franz told himself, to use the Byers method himself someday, minus the liquor, but not tonight, no, not until he had to.

The headlights of an unseen car on Noe illuminated the corner ahead at the foot of Beaver. While Franz scanned for shapes that might have been hiding in the dark and now revealed, he thought of Donaldus' inner defense perimeter, meaning his esthetic approach to life, his theory that art and reality, fiction and nonfiction, were all one, so that one needn't waste energy distinguishing them.

But wasn't even that defense a rationalization, Franz asked himself, an attempt to escape facing the overwhelming question that you're led to: *Are paramentals real?*

Yet how could you answer that question when you were on the run and getting weary and wearier?

And then Franz suddenly saw how he could escape for now, at least buy time in which to think in safety. And it did not involve liquor, drugs, or sex, or diminishing watchfulness in any way. He touched his pocketbook and felt inside it — yes, there was the ticket. He struck a match and glanced at his watch — not yet quite eight, still time enough if he moved swiftly. He turned. The dark-blue cab, having discharged its passenger, was coming down Beaver with its hire light on. He stepped into the street and waved it down. He started to get in, then hesitated. A searching glance told him that the dusky, lustrous interior was empty. He got inside and slammed the door, noting approvingly that the windows were closed.

"The Civic Center," he directed. "The Veterans Building. There is a concert there."

"Oh, one of those," the driver said, an older man. "If you don't mind, I won't take Market, it's too torn up. Going around, we'll get there quicker."

"That's fine," Franz said, settling back as the cab turned north on Noe and speeded up. He knew, or had been assuming, that ordinary physical laws didn't apply to paramentals, even if they were real, and

so that being in a swiftly moving vehicle didn't make his situation any safer, but it felt that way — it helped.

The familiar drama of a cab ride took hold of him a little — the dark house fronts and store fronts shooting past, the slowings at the bright corners, the red-green race with the stop lights. But he still kept scanning, regularly swinging his head to look behind, now to the left, now to the right.

"When I was a kid here," the driver said, "they didn't use to tear up Market so much. But now they do it all the time. That BART. And other streets too. All those damn high rises. We'd be better off without them."

"I'm with you there," Franz said.

"You and me both," the driver confirmed. "The driving'd sure be easier. Watch it, you bastard."

The last rather mildly spoken remark was intended for a car that was trying to edge into the right lane on McAllister, though hardly for the ears of its driver. Down a side street Franz saw a huge orange globe glowing aloft like a Jupiter that was all one Red Spot — advertisement of a Union 76 gas station. They turned on Van Ness and immediately drew up at the curb. Franz paid his fare, adding a generous tip, and crossed the wide sidewalk to the Veterans

Building and through its wide glass door into its lofty lobby set with eight-inch diameter tubular modernistic sculptures like giant metal worms at war.

With a few other late-coming concertgoers he hurried to the elevator at the back, feeling both claustrophobia and relief as the slow doors closed. On the fourth floor they joined the other last-minute folk giving up their tickets and taking their programs before entering the medium-size high, bone-white hall with its rows of chairs, now mostly occupied.

At first the press of people bothered Franz (anyone might be, or hide, anything) but rather swiftly began to reassure him by their concert-normality: the mostly conservative clothes, whether Establishment or Hippie; the scatter of elven folk in arty garb suitable for rarified artistic experiences; the elderly groups, the ladies in sober evening dresses with a touch of silver, the gentlemen rather fussily clad at collars and cuffs.

A very aware and coldly calculating section of Franz's mind told him that he was not one bit safer here than out in the dark. Nevertheless his fears were being lulled as they had been when he'd first arrived at Beaver Street and later, a little, in the cab.

He heard his name called, started, then hurried down an aisle

to where Gunnar and Saul were holding a seat between them in the third row.

"It's about time," Saul said darkly as Franz edged past.

As he sat down, Gun said from the seat just beyond, grinning somewhat thinly and momentarily laying his hand on Franz's forearms, "We were beginning to get afraid you weren't coming. You know how much Cal depends on you, don't you?" Then a puzzled question came into his face when the glass in Franz's pocket clashed as he pulled his jacket round.

"I broke my binoculars on Corona Heights," Franz said shortly. "I'll tell you about it later." Then a thought came to him. "Do you know much about optics, Gun? Practical optics — instruments and such, prisms and lenses?"

"A little," Gun replied, with an inquiring frown. "And I've a friend who's very much into it."

Franz said slowly, "Would it be possible to gimmick a terrestrial telescope, or a pair of binoculars, so a person would see something in the distance that wasn't there?"

"Well ..." Gunnar began, his expression wondering, his hands making a small gesture of uncertainty. Then he smiled. "Of course, if you tried to look through broken binoculars, I suppose you'd see something like a kaleidoscope."

"Taffy get rough?" Saul asked from the other side.

"Never mind now," Franz told Gunnar and with a quick, temporizing grimace at Saul (and a quick glance behind him and to either side — crowded concertgoers and their coats made such an effective stalking ground) and he looked toward the stage, where the half dozen or so instrumentalists were already seated — in a shallow, concave curve just beyond the conductor's podium, one of the strings still tuning thoughtfully. The long and narrow shape of the harpsichord, its slim bench empty, made the left end of the curve, somewhat downstage to favor its somest tones.

Franz looked at his program. The Brandenburg Fifth was the finale. There were two intermissions. The concert opened with:

Concerto in C Major
for Harpsichord and
Chamber Orchestra
by Giovanni Paisiello

1. Allegro
2. Larghetto
3. Allegro (Rondo)

Saul nudged him. He looked up. Cal had come on stage unobtrusively. She wore a white evening frock that left her shoulders bare and sparkled just a little at the edges. She said something to a woodwind and in turning looked the audience over without making a

point of it. He thought she saw him, but he couldn't be sure. She seated herself. The house lights went down. To a spreading ripple of applause the conductor entered, took his place, looked around from under his eyebrows at his instrumentalists, tapped the lectern with his wand, and raised it sharply.

Beside Franz, Saul murmured prayerfully, "Now in the name of Bach and Sigmund Freud, give 'em hell, Calpurnia!"

"And of Pythagoras," Gun faintly chimed.

The sweet and rocking music of the strings and of the softly calling, lulling woodwinds enfolded Franz. For the first time since Coronà Heights he felt wholly safe, among his friends and in the arms of ordered sound, as if the music were an intimate crystal heaven around and over them, a perfect barrier to paranatural forces.

But then the harpsichord came in challengingly, banishing cradled sleep, its sparkling and shivery ribbons of high sound propounding questions and gayly yet inflexibly commanding that they be answered. The harpsichord told Franz that the concert hall was every bit as much an escape as anything proposed on Beaver Street.

Before he knew what he was doing, though not until he knew well what he was feeling, Franz had got stoopingly to his feet and was

edging out in front of Saul, intensely conscious yet regardless of the waves of shock, protest, and condemnation silently focused upon him from the audience — or so he fancied.

He only paused to bend his lips close to Saul's ear and say softly but very distinctly, "Tell Cal, but only after she's played the Brandenburg, that her music made me go to find the answer to the 607 Rhodes question," and then he was edging on quite rapidly, the back of his left hand very lightly brushing back to steady his course, his right hand an apologetic shield between himself and the sitters he passed in front of.

As he reached the end of the row, he looked back once and saw Saul's frowning and intensely speculative face, framed by his long brown hair, fixed upon him. Then he was hurrying up the aisle between the hostile rows, lashed on — as if by a whip strung with thousands of tiny diamonds — by the music of the harpsichord, which never faltered. He kept his gaze fixed steadily ahead.

He wondered why he'd said "the 607 Rhodes question" instead of "the question of whether paramentals are real," but then he realized it was because it was a question Cal had herself asked more than once and so might catch the drift of.

In the street outside he resumed

his sidewise and backward peerings, now somewhat randomized; yet he was conscious not so much of fear as of wariness, as if he were a savage on a mission in a concrete jungle, traveling along bottoms of perilously walled, rectilineal gorges. Having taken a deliberate plunge into danger, he felt almost cocky.

He headed over two blocks and then up Larkin, walking rapidly yet not noisily. The passersby were few. The gibbous moon was almost overhead. Up Turk a siren yelped some blocks away. He kept up his swiveling watch for the paramental of his binoculars and/or for Thibaut's ghost, perhaps a material ghost formed of Thibaut's floating ashy remains, or a portion of them. Such things might not be real, there still might be a natural explanation (or he might be crazy), but until he was sure of one or the other, it was only good sense to stay on guard.

Down Ellis the slot which held his favorite tree was black, but its streetside branch-ends were green in the white street lights.

He turned down Geary past dark shop fronts, two lighted bars, and the wide yawning mouth of the De Soto garage, home of the blue taxicabs, and came to the dingy white awning that marked 811.

Inside the lobby there were a couple of rough-looking male types sitting on the ledge of small hexagonal marble tiles below the two

rows of brass mailboxes. Probably drunk. They followed him with their dull eyes as he took the elevator.

He got off at six and closed the two elevator doors quietly (the folding latticed and the solid one) and walked softly past the black window and the black broom-closet door, with its gaping round hole where the knob would have been, and stopped in front of his own door.

After listening a short while and hearing nothing, he unlocked it with two twists of his key and stepped inside, feeling a burst of excitement and fear. This time he did not switch on the bright ceiling light, but only stood listening and intent, waiting for his eyes to accommodate.

The room was full of darkness. Outside the open window the night was pale (dark gray, rather) with the moon and with the indirect glow of the city's lights. Moonlight was not yet coming into the room. Everything was very quiet except for the faint, distant rumbles and growls of traffic and the rushing of his blood. Suddenly there came through the pipes a solid, low roaring as someone turned on water a floor or two away. It stopped as suddenly and the inside silence returned.

Adventurously, Franz shut the door and felt his way along the wall

and around the tall clothes cabinet, carefully avoiding the work-laden coffee table, to the head of his bed, where he turned on the light. He ran his gaze along his Scholar's Mistress, lying slim; dark and inscrutably silent against the wall, and on to the open casement window.

Two yards inside it, the large oblong of fluorescent red cardboard lay on the floor. He walked over and picked it up. It was jaggedly bent down the middle and a little ragged at corners. He shook his head, set it against the wall, and went back to the window. Two torn corners of cardboard were still tacked to the window sides. The drapes hung tidily. There were crumbles and tiny shreds of pale brownish paper on his narrow desk and the floor at his feet. He couldn't remember whether or not he'd cleaned up those from yesterday.

Conceivably a very strong gust of wind could have torn out the red cardboard, but wouldn't it also have disordered the drapes and blown the paper crumbs off his desk? He looked out to the red lights of the TV tower, thirteen of them small and steady, six brighter and flashing. Below, a mile closer, the dark hump of Corona Heights was outlined by the city's yellowish window and street lights and a few bright whites and greens in snaky curves. Again he shook his head.

He rapidly searched his place, this time not feeling foolish. In the closet and clothes cabinet he swung the hanging garments aside and glanced behind them. He noticed a pale-gray raincoat of Cal's from weeks back. He looked behind the shower curtain and under the bed.

On the table between the closet and bathroom doors lay his unopened mail. Topmost was a cancer drive letter from the hospital where Daisy had died. He frowned and momentarily narrowed his lips, his face compressed with pain. Beside the little pile were a small slate, some pieces of white chalk, and his prisms, with which he occasionally played with sunlight, splitting it into spectrums and into spectrums of spectrums. He called to his Scholar's Mistress, "We'll have you in gay clothes again, just like a rainbown, my dear, after all this is over."

He got a city map and a ruler and went to his couch, where he fished his broken binoculars out of his pocket and set them carefully on an unplied edge of the coffee table. It gave him a feeling of safety to think that now the snout-faced paramental couldn't get to him without crossing broken glass, like that which they used to cement atop walls to keep out intruders — until he realized just how illogical that was.

He took out Smith's journal too

and settled himself beside his Scholar's Mistress, spreading out the map. Then he opened the journal to de Castries' curse, marveling again that it had so long eluded him, and reread the crucial portion:

The fulcrum (0) and the Cipher (A) shall be here, at his beloved 607 Rhodes. I'll be at rest in my appointed spot (1) under the Bishop's Seat, the heaviest ashes that he ever felt. Then when the weights are on at Sutro Mount (4) and Monkey Clay (5) [(4) + (1) = (5)] *BE his Life Squeezed Away*.

Now to work out, he told himself, this problem in black geometry, or would it be black physics? What had Byers said Klaas had said de Castries had called it? Oh yes, Neopythagorean metageometry.

Monkey Clay was the most incongruous item in the course, all right. Start there. Donaldus had maundered about simian and human clay, but that led nowhere. It ought to be a *place*, like Mount Sutro — or Corona Heights (under the Bishop's Seat). Clay was a street in San Francisco. But Monkey?

Franz's mind leapt from Monkey Clay to Monkey Wards. Why? He'd known a man who'd worked at Sears Roebuck's great rival and said he and some of his lowly co-workers called their company that.

Another leap, from Monkey Wards to the Monkey Block. Of course! The Monkey Block was the proudly derisive name of a huge old San Francisco apartment building, long torn down, where bohemians and artists had lived cheaply in the Roaring Twenties and the Depression years. Monkey short for the street it was on — Montgomery! Another San Francisco street, and one crosswise to Clay! (There was something more than that, but his mind hung fire and he couldn't wait.)

He excitedly laid the ruler on the flattened map between Mount Sutro and the intersection of Clay and Montgomery Streets in the north end of the financial district. He saw that the straight line so indicated went through the middle of Corona Heights! (And also rather close by the intersection of Geary and Hyde, he noted with a little grimace.)

He took a pencil from the coffee table and marked a small five at the Montgomery-Clay intersection, a four by Mount Sutro, and a one in the middle of Corona Heights. He noted that the straight line became like a balance or scales then (two lever arms) with the balancing point or fulcrum somewhere between Corona Heights and Montgomery-Clay. It even balanced mathematically: four plus one equals five — just as was noted in

the curse before the final injunction. That miserable fulcrum (O), wherever it was, would surely be pressed to death by those two great lever arms ("Give me a place to stand and I will stomp the world to death." — Archimedes) just as that poor little lower-case "his" was crushed between that dreadful BE and the three big capitalized words.

Yes, that unfortunate (O) would surely be suffocated, compressed to a literal nothing, especially when "the weights" were "on." Now what —?

Suddenly it occurred to Franz that whatever had been the case in the past, the weights were certainly on *now*, with the TV tower standing three-legged on Mount Sutro and with Montgomery-Clay the location of the Transamerica Pyramid, San Francisco's tallest building! (The "something else" was that the Monkey Block had been torn down to clear a site first for a parking lot, then for the Transamerica Pyramid. Closer and closer!)

That was why the curse hadn't got Smith. He'd died before either structure had been built. The trap hadn't become set until *now*.

The Transamerica Pyramid and the 1,000-foot TV tower — those were crushers, all right.

But it was ridiculous to think that de Castries could have predicted the building of those structures. And in any case coincidence

— lucky hits — was an adequate explanation. Pick any intersection in downtown San Francisco, and there was at least a fifty-percent chance of there being a high rise there, or nearby.

But why was he holding his breath then, why was there a faint roaring in his ears, why were his fingers cold and tingling?

Why had de Castries told Klaas and Ricker that prescience, or foreknowledge, was possible at certain spots in mega-cities? Why had he named his book (it lay beside Franz now, a dirty gray) *Megapolisomancy*?

Whatever the truth behind, the weights certainly were on now, no question.

Which made it all the more important to find out the real location of that baffling 607 Rhodes where the old devil had lived (dragged out the tail end of his life) and Smith had asked his questions ... and where, according to the curse, the ledger containing the Grand Cipher was hidden ... and where the curse would be fulfilled. Really, it was quite like a detective story. By Dashiell Hammett? "X marks the spot" where the victim was (will be?) discovered, crushed to death? They'd put up a brass plaque at Bush and Stockton near where Brigid O'Shaunnessy had shot Miles Archer in Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, but there were

no memorials for Thibaut de Castries, a real person. Where was the elusive X, or mystic (O)? Where was 607 Rhodes? Really, he should have asked Byers when he'd had the chance. Call him up now? No, he'd severed his connection there. Beaver Street was an area he didn't want to venture back to, even by phone. At least for now. But he left off poring over the map as futile.

His gaze fell on the 1927 San Francisco City Directory he'd ripped off that morning that formed the midsection of his Scholar's Mistress. Might as well finish that bit of research right now — find the name of this building, if it ever had one, if it had, indeed, become a listed hotel. He heaved the thick volume onto his lap and turned the dingily yellowed pages to the "Hotels" section. At another time he'd have been amused by the old advertisements for patent medicines and barber parlors.

He thought of all the searching around he'd done this morning at the Civic Center. It all seemed very far off now and quite naive.

Let's see, the best way would be to search through the addresses, not for Geary Street — there'd be a lot of hotels on Geary — but for 811. There'd probably only be one of those, if any. He began running a fingernail down the first column rather slowly, but steadily.

He was on the next to the last

column before he came to an 811. Yes, it was Geary too, all right. The name was ... the Rhodes Hotel.

Before he realized why he was doing it, he had got up and gone out into the hall and closed his door.

Then he knew why. It was to see the number on the door, the small dark oblong on which was incised in pale gray, 607. He wanted to see it actually and to see his room from the outside (and incidentally disassociate himself from the curse, get off the target).

He got the feeling that if he knocked just now (as Clark Smith must have knocked so many times on this same door) Thibaut de Castries would open it, his sunk-cheeked face a webwork of fine gray wrinkles as if it had been sprinkled with fine ashes.

If he went in without knocking, it would be as he'd left it. But if he knocked, then the old spider would wake

He felt vertigo, as if the building were beginning to lean over with him inside it, to rotate ever so slowly, at least at first ... the feeling was like earthquake panic.

He had to orient himself at once, he told himself, to keep himself from falling over with 811. He went down the dark hall (the bulb inside the globe over the elevator door was still out) past the black broom closet, the black-

painted window of the airshaft, the elevator itself, and softly up the stairs two flights, gripping the banister to keep his balance, and under the peaked skylight of the stairwell into the sinister black room that housed under a larger skylight the elevator's motor and relays, and so out onto the tarred and graveled roof.

The stars were in the sky where they should be, though naturally dimmed somewhat by the glare of the gibbous moon, which was in the top of the sky a little to the south. Orion and Aldebaran climbed the east. Polaris was at his unchanging spot. All round about stretched the angular horizon, crenelated with high rises and skyscrapers marked rather sparsely with red warning and yellow window lights, as if somewhat aware of the need to conserve energy. The moderate wind was from the west.

His dizziness gone at least, Franz moved toward the back of the roof, past the mouths of the air shafts that were like walled square wells, and watchful for the low vent pipes covered with heavy wire netting that were so easy to trip over, until he stood at the roof's west edge above his room and Cal's. One of his hands rested on the low wall. Off a short way behind him was the air shaft that dropped straight down by the window he'd passed in the hall and the corresponding ones

above and below it. Opening on the same shaft, he recalled, were the bathroom windows of another set of apartments and also a vertical row of quite small windows that could only let into the disused broom closets, originally to give them some light, he supposed. He looked west at the flashing reds of the TV tower and at the irregularly rounded darkness of the Heights. The wind freshened a little.

He thought at last, this is the Rhodes Hotel. I live at 607 Rhodes, the place I've hunted for everywhere else. There's really no mystery at all about it. Behind me is the Transamerica Pyramid (5). (He looked overshoulder at it where its single red flashed bright and its lighted windows were as narrow as the holes in a business machine card.) In front of me (he turned back) are the TV tower (4) and the crowned and hunchbacked eminence (1) where the old spider king's ashes lie buried, as they say. And I am at the fulcrum (O) of the Curse.

As he fatalistically told himself that, the stars seemed to grow dimmer still, a sickly pallor, and he felt a sickness and a heaviness within himself and all around, as if the freshening wind had blown something malignant out of the west to this dark roof, as if some universal disease or cosmic pollution were spiraling from Corona

Heights to the whole cityscape and so up to the stars, infecting even Orion and the Shield — as if with the stars' help he'd been getting things in place and now something was refusing to stay in its appointed spot, refusing to stay buried and forgotten, like Daisy's cancer, and interfering with the rule of number and order in the universe.

He heard a sudden scuffling and a scuttling sound behind him and he spun around. Nothing there, nothing that he could see, and yet

He moved to the nearest air shaft and looked down. Moonlight penetrated it as far as his floor, where the little window to the broom closet was open. Below that, it was very dimly lit from two of the bathroom windows — indirect light seeping from the living rooms of those apartments. He heard a sound as of an animal snuffing, or was that his own heavy breathing reflected by the echoing sheetiron? And he fancied he saw (but it was very dim) something with rather too many limbs moving about, rapidly down and up.

He jerked his head back and then up, as if looking to the stars for help, but they seemed as lonely and uncaring as the very distant windows a lone man sees who is about to be murdered on a moor or sink into the Great Grimpen Marsh at dead of night. Panic seized him

and he rushed back the way he'd come. As he passed through the black room of the elevator, the big copper switches snapped loudly and the relay arms clashed grindingly, hurrying his flight as if there were a monster snapping at his heels.

He got some control of himself going down the stairs, but on his own floor as he passed the black-painted window (near the dark ceiling globe) he got the feeling there was something supremely agile crouched against the other side of it, clinging in the air shaft, something midway between a black panther and a spider monkey, but perhaps as many-limbed as a spider and perhaps with the creviced, ashen face of Thibaut de Castries, about to burst in through the wire-toughened glass. And as he passed the black door of the broom closet, he remembered that small window opening from it into the shaft, that would not be too small for such a creature. And how the broom closet itself was right up against the wall that ran along the inside of his couch. How many of us in a big city, he asked himself, know anything about what lies in or just on the other side of the outer walls of our apartments, often the very wall against which we sleep? — as hidden and unreachable as our internal organs. We can't even trust the walls that guard us.

In the hall, the broom closet door seemed suddenly to bulge. For a frantic moment he thought he'd left his keys in his room; then he had found them in his pocket and located the right one on the ring and got the door open and himself inside and the door double-locked behind him against whatever might have followed him from the roof.

But could he trust his room with its open window? — no matter how unreachable the latter was in theory. He searched the place again, this time finding himself impelled to view each volume of space. Even pulling the file drawers out and peering behind the folders did not make him feel embarrassed. He searched his clothes cabinet last and so thoroughly that he discovered on its floor against the wall behind some boots an unopened bottle of kirschwasser he must have squirreled away there over a year ago when he was still drinking.

He glanced toward the window with its crumbles of ancient paper and found himself picturing de Castries when he'd lived here. The old spider had doubtless sat before the window for long hours, viewing his grave-to-be on Corona Heights with forested Mount Sutro beyond. And had he previsioned the tower that would rise there? The old spiritualists and occultists believed that the astral remains, the odic dust, of a person lingered on in

rooms where he'd lived.

If only there were someone to talk to and free him from these morbid thoughts! If only Cal and the others would get back from the concert. But his wristwatch indicated that it was only a few minutes past nine. Hard to believe his room searches and roof visit had taken so little time, but the second hand of his wristwatch was sweeping around steadily in almost imperceptibly tiny jerks.

The thought of the lonely hours ahead made him feel desperate, and the bottle in his hand with its white promise of oblivion tempted him, but the dread of what might happen when he had made himself unarousable was still greater.

He set the cherry brandy down beside yesterday's mail, also still unopened, and his prisms and slate. He'd thought the last was blank, but now he fancied he saw faint marks on it. He took it and the chalk and prisms lying on it over to the lamp at the head of his couch. He'd thought of switching on the 200-watt ceiling light, but somehow he didn't like the idea of having his window stand out that glaringly bright, perhaps for a watcher on Corona Heights.

There *were* spidery chalk marks on the slate — a half dozen faint triangles that narrowed toward the downward corner, as if someone or some force had been lightly outlin-

ing (the chalk perhaps moving like the planchette of a Ouija board) the snouted face of his paramental. And now the chalk and one of the prisms *were* jumping about like planchettes, his hands holding the slate were shaking so.

His mind was almost paralyzed, almost blanked, by sudden fear, but a free corner of it was thinking how a white five-pointed star with one point directed *upward* (or outward) is supposed in witchcraft to protect a room from the entry of evil spirits, as if the entity would be spiked on the star's upward (or outward) point, and so he was hardly surprised when he found that he'd put down the slate on the end of his piled coffee table and was chalking such stars on the sills of his windows; the open one and the locked one in the bathroom, and above his door. He felt distantly ridiculous but didn't even consider not completing the stars. In fact, his imagination ran on to the possibility of even more secret passageways and hiding places in the building than the air shafts and broom closets (mightn't there have been a dumb-waiter or a laundry chute in the Rhodes Hotel? — and who knows what auxiliary doors?), and he became bothered that he couldn't inspect the back walls of the closet and clothes cabinet more clearly, and in the end he closed the doors of both and chalked a star

above them — and a small star above the transom.

He was considering chalking one more star on the wall by his couch, where it abutted the broom closet in the hall, when there sounded at his door a sharp *knock-knock*. He put on the chain before he opened it the two inches which that allowed.

Half of a toothy mouth and a large brown eye were grinning up at him across the chain and a voice saying, "E-chess?"

Franz quickly unhooked the chain and opened the door eagerly. He was vastly relieved to have a familiar person with him, sharply disappointed that it was someone with whom he could hardly communicate at all — certainly not that stuff crowding his mind, yet consoled by the thought that at least they shared the language of chess — and chess would at least pass some time, he hoped.

Fernando came in beaming, though frowning questioningly a moment at the chain, and then again at Franz when he quickly reclosed and double-locked the door.

In answer Franz offered him a drink. Fernando's black eyebrows went up at sight of the square bottle, and he smiled wider and nodded, but when Franz had opened the bottle and poured him a small wine glass, he hesitated,

asking with his mobile features and expressive hands why Franz wasn't drinking.

As the simplest solution, Franz poured himself a bit in another wine glass, hiding with his fingers how little, and tilted the glass until the aromatic liquid wet his closed lips. He offered Fernando a second drink, but the latter pointed towards the chessmen, then at his head, which he shook smilingly.

Franz set the chessboard somewhat precariously on top of the piled folders on the coffee table and sat down on the bed. Fernando looked somewhat dubiously at the arrangement, then shrugged and smiled, drew up a chair and sat down opposite. He got the white pawn, and when they'd set up the men, he opened confidently.

Franz made his moves quickly too. He found himself almost automatically resuming the "on guard" routine he'd employed at Beaver Street while listening to Byers. His watchful gaze would move from the end of the wall behind him to his clothes cabinet to the door, then past a small bookcase and desk, pause at the window, then travel along his filing cabinets to the steam radiator and to the other end of the wall behind him, then start back again. He got the ghost of a bitter taste as he wet his lips — the kirschwasser.

Fernando won in twenty moves

or so. He looked thoughtfully at Franz for a couple of moments, as if about to make some point about his indifferent play, but instead smiled and began to set up the men with colors reversed.

With deliberate recklessness Franz opened with the king's gambit. Fernando countered in the center with his queen's pawn. Despite the dangerous and chancy position, Franz found he couldn't concentrate on the game. He kept searching his mind for other precautions to take besides his visual guard. He strained his ears for sounds at the door and beyond the other partitions. He wished desperately that Fernando had more English, or weren't so deaf. The combination was simply too much.

And the time passed so slowly. The large hand of his wristwatch was frozen. It was like one of those moments at a drunken party, when you're on the verge of blackout, that seem to last forever. At this rate it would be ages before the concert was over.

And then it occurred to him that he had no guarantee that Cal and the others would return at once. People generally went to bars or restaurants after performances, to celebrate or talk.

He was faintly aware of Fernando studying him between the moves.

Of course he could go back to

the concert himself when Fernando left. But that wouldn't settle anything. He'd left the concert determined to solve the problem of de Castries' curse and all the strangeness that went with it. And at least he'd made progress. He'd already answered the literal 607 Rhodes question, but of course he'd meant a lot more than that when he'd spoken to Saul.

But how could he find the answer to the whole thing anyway? Serious psychic or occult research was a matter of elaborate preparation and study, using delicate, carefully checked-out instruments, or at any rate sensitive, trained people salted by previous experience: mediums, sensitives, telepaths, clairvoyants and such — who'd proved themselves with Rhine cards and what not. What could he hope to do just by himself in one evening? What had he been thinking of when he'd walked out on Cal's concert and left her that message?

Yet somehow he had the feeling that all the psychical research experts and their massed experience wouldn't really be a bit of help to him now. Any more than the science experts would be with their incredibly refined electronic and radionic detectors and photography and what not. That amid all the fields of the occult and fringe-occult that were flourishing today

— witchcraft, astrology, biofeedback, dowsing, psychokinesis, auras, acupuncture, exploratory LSD trips, loops in the time stream, astrology (much of them surely fake, some of them maybe real) — this that was happening to him was altogether different.

He pictured himself going back to the concert, and he didn't like the picture. Very faintly, he seemed to hear the swift, glittery music of a harpsichord, still luring and lashing him on imperiously.

Fernando cleared his throat. Franz realized he'd overlooked a mate in three moves and had lost the second game in as few moves as the first. He automatically started to set up the pieces for a third.

Fernando's hand, palm down in an emphatic "No," prevented him. Franz looked up.

Fernando was looking intently at him. The Peruvian frowned and shook a finger at Franz, indicating he was concerned about him. Then he pointed at the chessboard, then at his own head, touching his temple. Then he shook his head decisively, frowning and pointing toward Franz again.

Franz got the message: "Your mind is not on the game." He nodded.

Fernando stood up, pushing his chair out of the way, and pantomimed a man afraid of something that was after him. Crouching a

little, he kept looking around, much as Franz had been doing but more obviously. He kept turning and looking suddenly behind him, now in one direction, now the other, his face big-eyed and fearful.

Franz nodded that he got it.

Fernando moved around the room, darting quick glances at the hall door and the window. While looking in another direction, he rapped loudly on the radiator with his clenched fists, then instantly gave a great start and backed off from it.

A man very afraid of something, startled by sudden noises, that must mean. Franz nodded again.

Fernando did the same thing with the bathroom door and with the nearby wall. After rapping on the latter he stared at Franz and said, "*Hay hechiceria. Hechiceria ocultado en murallas.*"

What had Cal said that meant? "Witchcraft, witchcraft hidden in walls." Franz recalled his own wonderings about secret doors and chutes and passageways. But did Fernando mean it literally or figuratively? Franz nodded, but pursed his lips and otherwise tried to put on a questioning look.

Fernando appeared to notice the chalked stars for the first time. White on pale woodwork, they weren't easy to see. His eyebrows went up and he smiled understandingly at Franz and nodded approv-

ingly. He indicated the stars and then held his hands out, palms flat and away from him, at the window and doors, as if keeping something out, holding it at bay — meanwhile continuing to nod approvingly.

"*Bueno*," he said.

Franz nodded, at the same time marveling at the fear that had led him to snatch at such an irrational protective device, one that the superstition-sodden (?) Fernando understood instantly — stars among the graffiti on Corona Heights. Could they have been intended to keep dead bones at rest and ashes quiet? Had *Byers* sprayed them there?)

He stood up and went to the table and offered Fernando another drink, uncapping the bottle, but the latter refused it with a short crosswise wave of his hand, palm down, and crossed to where Franz had been and rapped on the wall behind the couch and turning toward Franz repeated, "*Hechiceria ocultado en muralla!*"

Franz looked at him questioningly. But the Peruvian only bowed his head and put three fingers to his forehead, symbolizing thought (and possibly the Peruvian was actually thinking too).

Then Fernando looked up with an air of revelation, took the chalk from the slate beside the chessboard, and drew on the wall a five-pointed star, larger and more con-

spicuous and better than any of Franz's.

"*Bueno*," Fernando said again, nodding. Then he thought again, or seemed to think, using the same gesture, and, when he was done, went quickly to the hall door and pantomimed himself going away and coming back, and then looked at Franz solicitously, lifting his eyebrows, as if to say, "You'll be all right in the meantime?"

Rather bemused by the pantomime and feeling suddenly quite weary, Franz nodded with a smile and (thinking of the star Fernando had drawn and the feeling of fellowship it had given him) said, "*Gracias*."

Fernando nodded with a like smile, unbolted the door and went out, shutting the door behind him. A little later Franz heard the elevator stop at his floor, its doors open and close, and go droning down. His ears and eyes were still on guard, tracking the faintest sounds and slightest sights, but tiredly, almost protestingly. Despite all the day's shocks and surprises, his evening mind (slave of his body's chemistry) was taking over. Presumably Fernando had gone somewhere — but why? to fetch what? — and eventually would come back as he'd pantomimed — but how soon? and again why? Franz didn't much care. He began automatically to tidy around him.

Soon he sat down with a weary sigh on the side of his bed and stared at the incredibly piled and crowded coffee table, wondering where to start. At the bottom was his neatly layered current writing work, which he'd hardly looked at or thought of since day before yesterday. Atop that were the phone on its long cord, his broken binoculars, his big tar-blackened, overflowing ashtray (but he hadn't smoked since he'd got in tonight and wasn't moved to now), the chessboard with its men half set up, beside it the flat slate scattered with its chalks, his prisms, and some captured chess pieces, and finally the tiny wine glasses and the square bottle of kirschwasser, still uncapped, where he'd set it down after offering it a last time to Fernando.

Gradually the whole jumbled arrangement began to seem drolly amusing to Franz, quite beyond dealing with. Although his eyes and ears were still tracking automatically (and kept on doing so), he almost giggled weakly. His evening mind invariably had its silly side, a tendency toward puns and oddly mixed clichés, and faintly psychotic epigrams — foolishness born of fatigue. He recalled how neatly the psychologist F. C. MacKnight had described the transition from waking to sleeping: the mind's short logical daytime steps becom-

ing longer by degrees, each mental jump a little more far-fetched and wild, until (with never a break) they were utterly unpredictable giant strides and one was dreaming.

He picked up the city map from where he'd left it spread on his bed, and without folding it he laid it as if it were a coverlet atop the clutter on the coffee table.

"Go to sleep, little junk pile," he said with humorous tenderness.

And he laid the ruler he'd been using on top of that, like a magician relinquishing his wand.

Then (his ears and eyes still doing their guard rounds) he half turned to the wall where Fernando had chalked the star and began to put his books to bed too, as he had the mess on the coffee table, tucking in his Scholar's Mistress for the night, as it were — a homely operation upon familiar things that was the perfect antidote even to wildest fears.

Upon the yellowed, brown-edged pages of *Megapolisomancy* — the section about "electromephitic city-stuff" — he gently laid Smith's journal, open at the curse.

"You're very pale, my dear," he observed (the rice paper), "and yet the left-hand side of your face has all those very odd black beauty marks, a whole page of them. Dream of a lovely Satanist party in full evening dress, all black and

white like *Marienbad*, in an angel-food ballroom with creamy slim borzois stepping about like courteous giant spiders."

He touched a shoulder that was chiefly Lovecraft's *Outsider*, its large, forty-year-old Winnebago Eggshell pages open at *The Thing on the Doorstep*. He murmured to his mistress, "Don't deliquesce now, dear, like poor Asenath Waite. Remember, you've got no dental work (that I know of) by which you could be positively identified." He glanced at the other shoulder: coverless, crumble-edged *Wonder Stories* and *Weird Tales* with Smith's "The Disinterment of Venus" spread at the top. "That's a far better way to go," he commented. "All rosy marble under the worms and mold."

The chest was Ms. Lettland's monumental book, rather appropriately open at that mysterious, provocative, and question-raising chapter, "The Mammary Mystique: Cold as..." He thought of the feminist author's strange disappearance in Seattle. Now no one ever could know her further answers.

His fingers trailed across the rather slender black, gray-mottled waist made of James' ghost stories — the book had once been thoroughly rained on and then been laboriously dried out, page by page forever wrinkled, discolored page

— and he straightened a little the stolen city directory (representing hips), still open at the hotels section, saying quietly, "There, that'll be more comfortable for you. You know, dear friend, you're doubly 607 Rhodes now," and wondered rather dully what he meant by that.

He heard the elevator stop outside and its doors open, but didn't hear it going off again. He waited tautly, but there was no knock at his door, no footsteps in the hall that he could hear. There came from somewhere through the wall the faint jar of a stubborn door being quietly opened or closed, then nothing more of that.

He touched *The Spider Glyph in Time* where it was lying just below the directory. Earlier in the day his Scholar's Mistress had been lying on her face, but now on her back. He mused a moment (what had Lettland said?) as to why the exterior female genitalia were thought of as a spider. The tendrilled blot of hair? The mouth that opened vertically like a spider's jaws instead of horizontally like the human face's lips or the labia of the Chinagirls of sailors' legendry? Old fever-racked Santos-Lobos suggested it involved the time to spin a web, the spider's clock. And what a charming cranny for a cobweb.

His feather-touching fingers moved on to *Knochenmadchen im*

Pelze (Mit Peitsche) — more of the dark hairiness, now changing to soft fur (furs, rather) wrapping the skeleton girls — and *Ames et Fantomes de Douleur*, the other thigh; de Sade (or his posthumous counterfeiter), tiring of the flesh, had really wanted to make the mind scream and the angels sob; shouldn't *The Ghosts of Pain* be *The Agonies of Ghosts*?

That book, taken along with Masoch's *Skeleton Girls in Furs (With Whips)*, made him think of what a wealth of death was here under his questing hands. Lovecraft dying quite swiftly in 1937, writing enthusiastically until the end, taking notes on his last sensations. (Did he see any paramentals then?) Smith going more slowly some quarter century later, his brain nibbled by little strokes. Santos-Lobos burned by his fevers to a thinking cinder. And was vanished Lettland dead? Montague there (his *White Tape* made a knee, only its paper was getting yellow) drowning by emphysema while he still wrote footnotes upon our self-suffocating culture.

Death and the fear of death! Franz recalled how deeply Lovecraft's *The Color Out of Space* had depressed him when he'd read it in his teens — the New England farmer and his family rotting away alive, poisoned by radioactives from the ends of the universe. Yet at the

same time it had been so fascinating. What was the whole literature of supernatural horror but an essay to make death itself exciting? — wonder and strangeness to life's very end. But even as he thought that, he realized how tired he was. Tired, depressed, and morbid — the unpleasant aspects of his evening mind, the dark side of its coin.

He finished tucking in his Scholar's Mistress — Prof. Nostig's *The Subliminal Occult* ("You disposed of Kirlian photography, doctor, but could you do as well with the paranatural?"), the copies of *Gnostica* (any relation to Prof. Nostig?), *The Mauritius Case* (did Etzel Andergast see paramentals in Berlin? — and Waramme smokier ones in Chicago?), *Hecate, or the Future of Witchcraft* by Yeats, and *Journey to the End of Night* ("And to your toes, my dear") — and wearily stretched himself out beside her, *still* stubbornly watchful for the tiniest suspicious sounds and sights. It occurred to him how he had come home to her at night as to a real wife or woman, to be relaxed and comforted after all the tensions, trials, and dangers (remember, they were still there!) of the day.

It occurred to him that he could probably still catch the Brandenburg Fifth if he sprang up and hurried, but he was too inert even to stir — to do anything except stay

awake and on guard until Cal and Gun and Saul returned.

The shaded light at the head of his bed fluctuated a little, dimming, then brightening sharply, then dimming again as if the bulb were getting very old, but he was much too weary to get up and replace it or even just turn on another light. Besides, he didn't want his window too brightly lit for something on Corona Heights (might still be there instead of here — who knew?) to see.

He noted a faint, pale, gray glitter around the edges of the casement window — the westering gibbous moon at last beginning to peer in from above, swing past the southern high rise into full view. He felt the impulse to get up and take a last look at the TV tower, say good night to his slender, thousand-foot goddess attended by moon and stars, put her to bed too, as it were, say his last prayers, but the same weariness prevented him. Also, he didn't want to show himself to Corona Heights or look upon the dark blotch of that place ever again.

The light at the head of his bed shone steadily, but it did seem a shade dimmer than it had been before the fluctuation, or was that just the pall cast by his evening mind?

Forget that now. Forget it all. The world was a rotten place. This

city was a mess, with its gimcrack high rises and trumpery skyscrapers. It had all tumbled down and burned in 1906 (at least everything around this building had) — and soon enough would again, and all the papers would be fed to the document-shredding machines, with or without the help of paramentals. (And was not humped, umber raw Corona Heights even now stirring?) And the entire world was just as bad, it was perishing of pollution, drowning and suffocating in chemical and atomic poisons, detergents and insecticides, industrial effluvia, smog, the stench of sulfuric acid, the quantities of steel, cement, aluminum ever bright, plastics and paper, gas and electron floods — electro-mephitic city-stuff indeed! — though the world hardly needed the paranatural to do it to death. It was blackly cancerous like Lovecraft's farm family slain by strange radioactives come by meteor from the end of nowhere.

But that was not the end. (He edged a little closer to his Scholar's Mistress.) The electro-mephitic sickness was spreading, had spread (had metastasized) from this world to everywhere. The universe was terminally diseased; it would die thermodynamically. Even the stars were infected. Who ever thought that those bright points of light meant anything? What were they but a swarm of phosphorescent

fruit flies momentarily frozen in an utterly random pattern around a garbage planet?

He tried his best to "hear" the Brandenburg Fifth that Cal was playing, the vastly varied, infinitely orderly diamond streamers of quill-plucked sound that made it the parent of all piano concertos. But all was silence.

What was the use of life anyhow? He had laboriously recovered from his alcoholism only to face the Nameless One once more in a new triangular mask. Effort wasted, he told himself now. In fact, he would have reached out and taken a bitter, stinging drink from the square bottle, except he was too tired to make the effort. He was an old fool to think Cal cared for him, as much a fool as Byers with his camp Chinese swinger and his teen-agers, his kinky paradise of sexy, slim-fingered, groping cherubs.

Franz's gaze wandered to Daisy's painted, dark-nested face upon the wall, narrowed by perspective to slit eyes and a mouth that sneered above a tapering chin.

At that moment he began to hear a very faint scuffling in the wall, like that of a very large rat trying very hard to be quiet. From how far did it come? He couldn't tell. What were the first sounds of an earthquake like? — the ones only the dogs could hear. There

came a somewhat louder scuff, then nothing more.

He remembered the relief he'd felt when cancer had lobotomized Daisy's brain and she had reached the unfeeling vegetable stage and the need to keep himself anesthetized with alcohol had become a shade less pressing.

The light behind his head arced brightly greenish white, fluttered, and went out. He started to sit up, but barely lifted a finger. The darkness in the room took forms like the Black Pictures of witchcraft, crowd-stupefying marvels, and Olympian horrors which Goya painted for himself in his old age, a very proper way to decorate a home. His lifted finger vaguely moved toward Fernando's blacked-out star, then dropped back. A small sob formed and faded in his throat. He snuggled close to his Scholar's Mistress, his fingers touching her Lovecraftian shoulder. He thought of how she was the only real person that he had. Darkness and sleep closed on him without a sound.

Time passed.

Franz dreamed of utter darkness and of a great, white, crackling, ripping noise, as of endless sheets of newsprint being crumpled and dozens of books being torn across at once and their stiff covers cracked and crushed — a paper pandemonium.

Despite that mighty noise, he next thought he woke very tranquilly into two rooms: this with the this-in-dream superimposed. He tried to make them come together. Daisy was lying peacefully beside him. Both he and she were very, very happy. They had talked last night and all was very well. Her slim, silken, dry fingers touched his cheek and neck.

With a cold plunge of feelings, the suspicion came to him that she was dead. The touching fingers moved reassuringly. There seemed to be almost too many of them. No, Daisy was not dead, but she was very sick. She was alive, but in the vegetable stage, mercifully tranquilized by her malignancy. Horrible, yet it was still a comfort to lie beside her. Her fingers were so very slim and silken dry, so very strong and many, all starting to grip tightly — they were not fingers but wiry black vines rooted inside her skull, growing in profusion out of her cavernous orbits, gushing luxuriantly out of the triangular hole between the nasal and the vomer bones, turning in tendrils from under her upper teeth so white, pushing insidiously and insistently, like grass from sidewalk cracks, out of her pale-brown cranium, bursting apart the squamous, sagittal, and coronal sutures.

Franz sat up with a convulsive start, gagging on his feelings, his

heart pounding, cold sweat breaking from his forehead.

Moonlight was pouring in the casement window, making a long, coffin-size pool upon the carpeted floor beyond the coffee table, throwing the rest of the room into darker shadow by contrast.

He was fully clothed, his feet ached in his shoes.

He realized with enormous gratitude that he was truly awake at last, that Daisy and the vegetative horror that had destroyed her were both gone, vanished far swifter than smoke.

He found himself acutely aware of all the space around him: the cool air against his face and hands, the eight chief corners of this room, the slot outside the window shooting down six floors between this building and the next to basement level, the seventh floor and roof above, the hall on the other side of the wall behind him beyond the head of his bed, the broom closet on the other side of the wall beside him that held Daisy's picture and Fernando's star, and the air shaft beyond the broom closet.

And all his other sensations and all his thoughts seemed equally vivid and pristine. He told himself he had his morning mind again, all rinsed by sleep, fresh as sea air. How wonderful! He'd slept the whole night through (had Cal and the boys knocked softly at his door

and gone shrugging and smiling away?) and now was waking an hour or so before dawn, just as the long astronomical twilight began, simply because he'd gone to sleep so early. Had Byers slept as well? — he doubted that, even with his skinny-slim, decadent soporifics.

But then he realized that the moonlight still streaming in, as it had started to before he slept, and pooling on the floor, proved that he'd only been asleep an hour or less.

His skin quivered a little, and the muscles of his legs grew tense, his whole body quickened as if in anticipation of ... he didn't know what.

He felt a paralyzing touch on the back of his neck. Then the narrow, prickly dry vines (it felt — though they were fewer now) moved with a faint rustle through his lifted hairs past his ear to his right cheek and jaw. They were growing out of the wall ... no ... they were not vines, *they were the fingers of the narrow right hand of his Scholar's Mistress, who had sat up naked beside him*, a tall pale shape unfeatured in the smudging gloom. She had an aristocratically small, narrow face and head (black hair?), a long neck, imperially wide shoulders, an elegant, Empire-high waist, slender hips and long, long legs — very much the shape of the skeletal steel TV tower, a far

slenderer Orion (with Rigel serving as a foot instead of knee).

The fingers on her right arm that was snaked around his neck now crept across his cheek and toward his lips, while she turned and leaned her face a little toward his. It was still featureless against the darkness, yet the question rose unbidden in his mind as to whether it was just such an intense look that the witch Asenath (Waite) Derby would have turned upon her husband Edward Derby when they were in bed, with old Ephraim Waite (Thibaut de Castries?) peering with her from her hypnotic eyes.

She leaned her face closer still, the fingers of her right hand crept softly yet intrusively upward toward his nostrils and eye, while out of the gloom at her left side her other hand came weaving on its serpent-slender arm toward his face.

Shrinking away violently, he threw up his own left hand protectively and with a convulsive thrust of his right and of his legs against the mattress, he heaved his body across the coffee table, carrying all its heaped contents clattering and thudding and clashing (the glasses and binoculars) and cascading with him to the floor beyond, where (having turned over completely) he lay in the edge of the pool of moonlight, except for his head, which was in the shadow between it and the door. In turning

over, his face had come close to the big ashtray as it was oversetting and to the gushing kirschwasser bottle, and he had gotten whiffs of stinking tobacco tar and stinging, bitter alcohol. He felt the hard shapes of chessmen under him. He was staring back wildly at the bed he'd quitted and for the moment he saw only darkness.

Then out of that darkness there lifted up, but not very high, the long pale shape of his Scholar's Mistress. She seemed to look about her like an animal, her small head dipping this way and that on its slender neck; then with a nerve-racking, dry rustling sound she came writhing and scuttling swiftly after him across the low table and all its scattered and disordered stuff, her long-fingered hands reaching out far ahead of her on their wiry, pale arms. Even as he started to try to get to his feet, they closed upon his shoulder and side with a fearfully strong grip, and there flashed instantaneously across his mind a remembered line of poetry — "Ghosts are we, but with skeletons of steel."

With a surge of strength born of his terror he tore himself free of the trapping hands. But they had prevented him from rising, with the result that he only heaved over again through the moonlight pool and lay on his back, threshing, in its far edge, his head still in shadow.

Papers and chessmen and the ashtray's contents scattered further and flew. A wine glass crunched as his heel hit it. The dumped phone began to beep like a pedantic, furious mouse; from some near street a siren started to yelp like dogs being tortured; there was a great ripping noise as in his dream — the scattered papers churned and rose in seeming shreds a little from the floor — and through it all there sounded deep-throated, rasping screams which were Franz's own.

His Scholar's Mistress came twisting and hitching into the moonlight. Her face was still shadowed, but he could see that *her thin, wide-shouldered body was apparently formed solely of crumpled, crushed, and tightly compacted paper*, mottled pale brown and yellowish with age, as if made up of the chewed pages of all the magazines and books that had formed her on the bed, while about the back from her shadowed face there streamed black hair. (The books' shredded covers?) Her wiry limbs in particular seemed to be made up entirely of very tightly twisted and braided pale brown paper as she darted toward him with terrible swiftness and threw them around him, pinioning his own arms (and her long legs scissoring about his) despite all his flailings and convulsive kickings

while, utterly winded by his screaming, he gasped and mewed.

Then she twisted her head around and up, so that the moonlight struck her face. It was narrow and tapering, shaped somewhat like a fox's or a weasel's, formed like the rest of her of fiercely compacted paper, constrictedly humped and creviced, but layered over in this area with dead white (the rice paper?) speckled or pocked everywhere with a rash of irregular small black marks. It had no eyes, although it seemed to stare into his brain and heart. It had no nose. (Was *this* the Noseless One?) It had no mouth — but then the long chin began to twitch and lift a little like a beast's snout, and he saw that it was open at the end.

The cables of the braided arms and legs twisted around him tighter; and the face, going into shadow again, moved silently down toward his; and all that Franz could do was strain his own face back and away.

He saw on the black ceiling, above the dipping muzzle and black hair, a little patch of soft, harmonious, ghostly colors — the pastel spectrum of moonlight, cast by one of his prisms lying in the pool on the floor.

The dry, rough, hard face pressed against his, blocking his mouth, squeezing his nostrils; the snout dug itself into his neck. He felt a crushing, incalculably great weight

upon him. (The TV tower and the Transamerican! And the stars?) And filling his mouth and nose, the bone-dry, bitter dust of Thibaut de Castries.

At that instant the room was flooded with bright, white light; and, as if it were an injected instant stimulant, he was able to twist his face away from the rugose horror and his shoulders halfway around.

The door to the hall was open wide, a key still in the lock. Cal was standing on the threshold, her back against the jamb, a finger of her right hand touching the light switch. She was panting, as if she'd been running hard. She was still wearing her white concert dress and over it her black velvet coat, hanging open. She was looking a little above and beyond him with an expression of incredulous horror. Then her finger dropped away from the light switch as her whole body slowly slid downward, bending only at the knees. Her back stayed very straight against the jamb, her shoulders were erect, her chin was high, her horror-filled eyes did not once blink. Then when she had gone down on her haunches, like a witchdoctor, her eyes grew wider still with righteous anger, she tucked in her chin and put on her nastiest professional look, and in a harsh voice Franz had never heard her use before, she said:

"In the names of Bach, Mozart,

and Beethoven, the names of Pythagoras, Newton, and Einstein, by Bertrand Russell, William James, and Eustace Hayden, begone! All inharmonious and disorderly shapes and forces, depart at once!"

As she was speaking, the papers all around Franz (he could see now that they *were* shredded) lifted up cracklingly; the grips upon his arms and legs loosened so that he was able to inch toward Cal while violently threshing his half-freed limbs. Midway in her eccentric exorcism, the pale shreds began to churn violently and suddenly were multiplied tenfold in numbers (all restraints on him as suddenly gone) so that, at the end, he was crawling toward her through a thick paper snowstorm.

The innumerable - seeming shreds sank rustlingly all around him to the floor. He laid his head in her lap where she now sat erect in the doorway, half in, half out, and he lay there gasping, one hand clutching her waist, the other thrown out as far as he could reach into the hallway as if to mark on the carpet the point of farthest advance. He felt Cal's reassuring fingers on his cheek, while her other hand absently brushed scraps of paper from his coat.

He heard Gun say urgently, "Cal, are you all right? Franz!" Then Saul: "What the hell's happened to his room?" Then Gun

again: "My God, it looks like his whole library'd been through a document shredder," but all that he could see of them were shoes and legs. How odd. There was a third pair — brown denim pants, and brown, scuffed shoes, rather small; of course, Fernando.

Doors opened down the hall and heads thrust out. The elevator doors opened and Dorotea and Bonita hurried out, their faces anxious and eager. But what Franz found himself looking at, because it really puzzled him, was a score or more of dusty corrugated cartons neatly piled along the wall of the hall opposite the broom closet and with them three old suitcases and a small trunk.

Saul had knelt down beside him and was professionally touching his wrists and chest, drawing back his eyelids with a light touch to check the pupils, not saying anything. Then he nodded reassuringly to Cal.

Franz managed an inquiring look. Saul smiled at him easily and said, "You know, Franz, Cal left that concert like a bat out of hell. She took her bows with the other soloists, and she waited for the conductor to take his, but then she grabbed up her coat — she'd brought it on stage during the second intermission and laid it on the bench beside her (I'd given her your message) — and she took off

straight through the audience. You thought you'd offended them by leaving at the start. Believe me, it was nothing to the way she treated 'em! By the time we caught sight of her again, she was stopping a taxi by running out into the street in front of it. If we'd have been a bit slower, she'd have ditched us. As it was, she grudged us the time it took us to get in."

"And then she got ahead of us again when we each thought the other would pay the cab driver," Gun took up over his shoulder from where he stood inside the room at the edge of the great drift of shredded paper and stuff, as if hesitant to disturb it. "When we got inside she'd run up the stairs. By then the elevator had come down, so we took it, but she beat us anyway. Say, Franz," he asked, pointing, "who chalked that big star on your wall over the bed?"

At that question, Franz saw the small, brown, scuffed shoes step out decisively, kicking through the paper snow. Once again Fernando loudly rapped the wall above the bed, as if for attention, and turned and said authoritatively, "*Hechicería ocultado en muralla!*"

"Witchcraft hidden in the wall," Franz translated, rather like a child trying to prove he's not sick. Cal touched his lips reprovingly, he should rest.

Fernando lifted a finger, as if to

announce, "I will demonstrate," and came striding back, stepped carefully past Cal and Franz in the doorway. He went quickly down the hall past Dorotea and Bonita and stopped in front of the broom closet door and turned around. Gun, who had followed inquisitively behind him, stopped too.

The dark Peruvian gestured from the shut doorway to the neatly stacked boxes twice and then took a couple of steps on his toes with knees bent. ("I moved them out. I did it quietly.") and took a big screwdriver out of his pants pocket and thrust it into the hole where the knob had been and gave it a twist and with it drew the black door open and then with a preemptory flourish of the screwdriver stepped inside.

Gun followed and looked in, reporting back to Franz and Cal, "He's got the whole little room cleared out. My God, it's dusty. Now he's kneeling by the wall that's the other side of the one he pounded on. There's a little shallow cupboard built into it low down. It's got a door. Fuses? No, it wouldn't be that, I'd think. Now he's using the screwdriver to open it like he did the other. Well, I'll be damned."

He backed away to let Fernando emerge, smiling triumphantly and carrying before his chest a rather large, rather thin gray book. He

knelt by Franz and held it out to him, dramatically opening it. There was a puff of dust.

The two pages randomly revealed were covered from top to bottom, Franz saw, with unbroken lines of neatly yet crabbedly inked black astronomical and astrological signs and other cryptic symbols.

Franz reached out shakily toward it, then jerked his hand sharply back, as though afraid of getting his fingers burned.

It had to be the Fifty-Book, the Grand Cipher mentioned in *Megalopolisomancy* and Smith's journal (B) — the ledger that Smith had once seen and that was an essential ingredient (A) of the Curse and that had been hidden almost forty years ago by old Thibaut de Castries to do its work at the fulcrum (O) at (Franz shuddered, glancing up at his door) 607 Rhodes.

Next day, Gun incinerated the Grand Cipher at Franz's urgent entreaty, Cal and Saul concurring, but only after having it micro-filmed. Since then he's fed it to his computers repeatedly, and let several semanticists and linguists study it variously, without the least progress toward breaking the code, if there is one. Recently he told the others, "It almost looks like Thibaut de Castries may have created that mathematical will o' the wisp — a set of completely random

numbers." There did turn out to be exactly fifty symbols. Cal pointed out that fifty was the total number of faces of all the five Pythagorean or Platonic solids. But when asked what that led to, she could only shrug.

At first Gun and Saul couldn't help wondering whether Franz mightn't have torn up all his books and papers in some sort of short-term psychotic seizure. But they concluded it would have been an impossible task, at least to do in so short a time. "That stuff was shredded like oakum."

Gun also took apart Franz's binoculars (calling in his optical friend, who among other things had investigated and thoroughly debunked the famous Crystal Skull), but they found no trace of any gimmicking. The only noteworthy circumstance was the thoroughness with which the lenses and prisms had been smashed. "More oakum picking?"

Gun found one flaw in the detailed account Franz gave when he was up to it. "You simply can't see spectral colors in moonlight. The cones of the retina aren't that sensitive."

Franz replied somewhat sharply, "Most people can never see the green flash of the setting sun. Yet it's sometimes there."

Saul's comment was, "You've got to believe there's some sort of

sense in everything that crazies say." "Crazies?" "All of us."

He and Gun still live at 811 Geary. They've encountered no further paramental phenomena, at least as yet.

The Luques are still there too. Dorotea is keeping the existence of the broom closets a secret, especially from the owner. "He'd make me e-try to rent them if he knew."

Fernando's story, as finally interpreted by her and Cal, was simply that he'd once noticed the little low cupboard in the broom closet while rearranging the boxes there to make space for additional ones and that it had stuck in his mind ("*Misterioso!*") so that when "*Meestair Jueston*" had become haunted, he had remembered it and played a hunch.

The three Luques and the others (nine in all with Gun's and Saul's ladies) did eventually go for a picnic on Corona Heights after the winter's rains had turned it green. They even encountered the two little girls with the St. Bernard. Franz went a shade pale at that, but rallied quickly. Bonita played with them a while. All in all, they had an enjoyable time, but no one sat in the Bishop's Seat or hunted beneath it for signs of an old interment. Franz remarked, "I sometimes think the injunction not to move old bones is at the root of all the para ...supernatural."

He tried to get in touch with Jaime Byers again, but phone calls and even letters went unanswered. Later he learned that the affluent poet and essayist, accompanied by Fa Lo Suee (and Shirl Soames too, apparently) had gone for an extended trip around the world.

"Somebody always does that at the end of a supernatural horror story," he commented sourly, with slightly forced humor.

He and Cal now share an apartment a little farther up Nob Hill. Though they haven't married, Franz swears he'll never live alone again. He never slept another night in Room 607.

As to what Cal heard and saw (and did) at the end, she says, "When I got to the third floor I heard Franz start to scream. I had his key out. There were all those bits of paper swirling around him like a whirlpool. At its center, just beyond him, they made a sort of skinny pillar with a nasty top. So I said (*pace* my father) the first things that came into my mind. As soon as I got Franz's message, I knew I must get to him as quickly as I could, but only after we'd played the Brandenburg."

Franz thinks the Brandenburg Fifth somehow saved him, along with Cal's subsequent quick action, but as to how, he has no theories. Cal only says, "I think it's fortunate Bach had a very mathematical

mind and that Pythagoras was musical."

For a while Franz was very particular about never letting a book or magazine stay on his bed. But just the other day Cal found a straggling line of three there, on the

side nearest the wall. She didn't touch them, but she did tell Franz about it. "I don't know if I could swing it again," she said. "So take care."

Cal says, "Everything's very chancy."



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Acrostic Puzzle

by Georgia F. Adams

This puzzle contains a quotation from a work in science fiction. First, guess as many of the clues as you can and write the word or words in the numbered blanks opposite the clues. Put those letters in the matching blocks in the puzzle. (The end of a line in the diagram doesn't mean the end of a word.) If your words are correct, you will see words forming in the puzzle blocks. Fill in the missing letters and put them in the numbered spaces opposite the clues. That will help you guess those words and therefore get more of the puzzle, and so on. You don't need to be familiar with the quotation in order to work the puzzle. The first letters of the correctly answered clues will spell out the name of the author and the title of the work from which the quotation is taken.

1	V	2	U	3	E		4	B	5	D	6	H	7	E	B	8	W	9	U		10	E	11	U	12	B
13	V	14	M	15	H	16	A		17	J	18	E	19	P		20	S	21	C	22	A	23	R	24	F	
25	W	26	Z		27	E	28	D		29	Q	30	O	31	I		32	K	33	W	34	C	35	U		
36	T	37	V	38	N	39	C	40	F		41	R	42	S	43	O	44	D	45	E	46	U	47	A	48	L
	49	V	50	Q	51	J		52	E	53	C	54	Y	55	K	56	I	57	R	58	J			59	J	
60	K	61	B	62	T	63	W	64	A	65	P	66	U	67	C	68	Q		69	B	70	F	71	E	72	U
	73	L	74	A	75	K	76	W	77	U	78	E	79	I		80	D	81	K	82	Q	83	E			
84	U	85	O	86	T		87	R	88	W		89	K	90	J	91	V		92	T	93	S	94	J		
95	V		96	P	97	V	98	C		99	J	100	S	101	V	102	A	103	M		104	X	105	H		
106	O	107	L	108	C	109	D		110	U	111	L		112	N	113	J		114	D	115	I	116	Q		
117	P	118	W	119	Y	120	B	121	S		122	C	123	Q	124	E	125	P	126	X	127	K		128	N	
129	V	130	W	131	I		132	O	133	S	134	C	135	M		136	U	137	C	138	G		139	O		
140	Q	141	U		142	Z	143	Q	144	V		145	D	146	W	147	E	148	B		149	F	150	V		
151	W	152	K	153	M		154	P	155	G	156	V	157	I	158	N	159	S		160	O	161	R	162	Y	
	163	V	164	G	165	I	166	X		167	G	168	N	169	Y	170	P	171	K	172	D		173	I		
174	H	175	A	176	Y		177	G	178	X	179	I		180	P	181	G	182	X		183	Z	184	X		
185	I		186	G	187	A		188	M	189	T	190	Z		191	U	192	I	193	V	194	A				

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U. A tramp who is a dirty old man (2 words)	<u>11</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>46</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>72</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>110</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>191</u>		
		<u>77</u>	<u>136</u>	<u>84</u>	<u>141</u>						
V. Eaters of fish-possibly inhabitants of Windhaven	<u>193</u>	<u>37</u>	<u>163</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>129</u>	<u>95</u>	<u>150</u>	<u>13</u>	<u>97</u>	<u>169</u>	<u>101</u>
		<u>156</u>	<u>91</u>	<u>49</u>	<u>144</u>						
W. The act of flying-engaged in by some inhabitants of Windhaven	<u>63</u>	<u>8</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>33</u>	<u>76</u>	<u>130</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>151</u>	<u>146</u>	<u>118</u>	
X. Author of <i>The Worm Ouroboros</i>	<u>182</u>	<u>166</u>	<u>194</u>	<u>178</u>	<u>104</u>	<u>184</u>	<u>126</u>				
Y. Antonym of raise	<u>162</u>	<u>119</u>	<u>54</u>	<u>176</u>							
Z. One type of evergreen	<u>26</u>	<u>190</u>	<u>142</u>								

ANSWERS TO "ATOMIC TERMS" page 112

1. UNSTABLE (all radioactive elements are unstable as they emit particles and decay to form other elements)
2. THORIUM (a heavy element)
3. MONITOR (radiation detector)
4. COSMOTRON (a huge accelerator)
5. REACTOR (atomic "furnace")
6. NEUTRON (one of the three basic atomic particles)
7. RADIATION (the emission of very fast atomic particles or rays by nuclei)
8. POSITRON (a particle having the same weight and charge as an electron but is electrically positive instead of negative)
9. ISOTOPE (two nuclei of the same element having the same charge but different masses are so called)
10. RADIUM (one of the earliest radioactive elements)
11. TRACER (a radioisotope which is mixed with a stable material, enabling scientists to trace the material as it undergoes chemical and physical changes)
12. MODERATOR (material used to slow neutrons in a reactor)
13. DEUTERON (the nucleus of an atom of heavy hydrogen containing one proton and one neutron)
14. ACCELERATOR (a device for imparting high velocity to charged particles such as electrons or protons)
15. ROENTGEN (a unit of radioactive dose or exposure)

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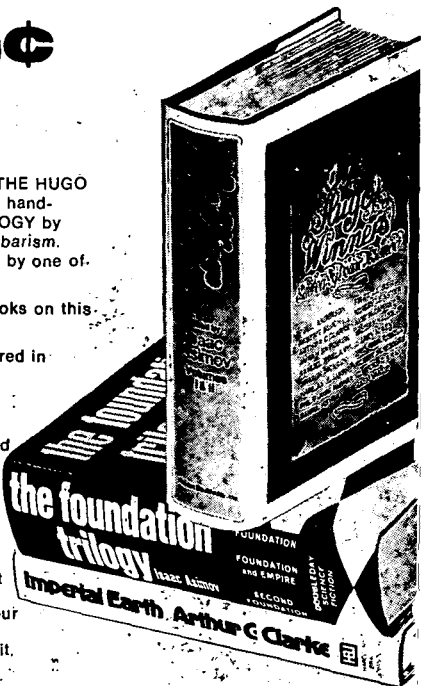
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